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EPISCOPAL DIVINITY SCHOOL

Thesis/Project

INTERPRETING PERPETUA AND HER DREAMS

BY

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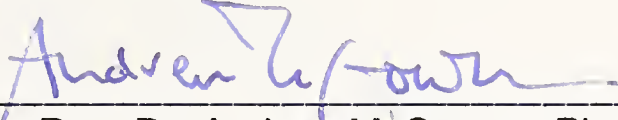
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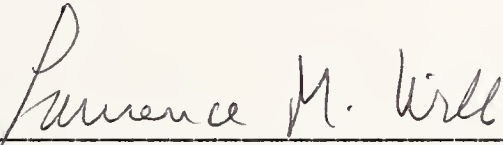
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CHAPTER ONE

PERPETUA: THE WOMAN AND THE TEXT

Introduction

Scholars have long been captivated by the story of Vibia Perpetua, an educated Roman citizen, young mother and Christian catechumen who was martyred in Carthage under the procurator Hilarianus in 203.¹ Mary R. Lefkowitz offers a brief recapitulation of the Perpetua narrative “In case,” as she humorously notes, “there is someone...who does not know [it] by heart”:

A narrator tells us about a group of Christians who were executed in Carthage in 203, including Vibia Perpetua, “a newly married woman of good family and upbringing...about twenty-two years old...with an infant son at the breast”; with her is her brother, also a Christian convert. The narrator then quotes directly from Perpetua’s own memoirs, which consist of her account of her imprisonment and of the dreams she had in prison; she tells how her father, who has remained a pagan, pleads with her to abandon her religion and tries to get the authorities to let her out; detailed, explicit visions tell her meanwhile that she must die. The narrator then tells the story of her fellow martyrs and their joint execution; they were exposed to wild beasts in the arena; Perpetua herself was attacked but not seriously wounded by a wild cow, and finally killed by a gladiator, whose sword she willingly guided to her neck.²

Foremost among the scholarly interests in Perpetua has been a sequence of

¹ For a discussion of Perpetua’s citizenship, probable social status and education, see Joyce E. Salisbury, *Perpetua’s Passion: The Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 5-8; for a discussion of the date of her martyrdom, see Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., *Prophecy in Carthage: Perpetua, Tertullian and Cyprian* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 13.

² Mary R. Lefkowitz, “The Motivations for St. Perpetua’s Martyrdom,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44 (September 1976): 417.

four dreams which Perpetua recorded during the imprisonment which preceded her execution. In writing about Perpetua's dreams, one soon confronts the fact that there is some dispute about the exact definition of the word "dream" and about exactly what it encompasses. In Perpetua's report of her dreams as well as in other ancient and modern dream descriptions, it is often difficult to determine from a text whether the experience described occurred while the subject was asleep or awake, conscious or unconscious, or in some intermediate state. If a dreamer or interpreter is silent on when or under what circumstances a dream occurred, it seems preferable to accept the most inclusive definition rather than risk losing important dream examples. Thus, for purposes of inclusivity, it seems wise to opt for the rather broad boundaries established by Benjamin Kilbourne who concludes that dreams "can designate not only dream states and the waking reports of these states but a variety of other experiences that might be called 'visions,' 'waking dreams,' 'hypnagogic fantasies,' or 'hallucinations.'"³

The interpretation of Perpetua's dreams has provided fertile ground for exploration by theologians, classicists, feminist and postmodernist critics and psychologists of varying schools, each choosing a different perspective from which to approach the text. Perpetua's dreams have even been incorporated into fictionalized accounts of her life, ranging from the libretto of a mid-eighteenth century Italian opera to a nineteenth century English dramatic poem to a twenty-first century Australian novel. I have attempted to collect as many of these interpretations as I could find, adding to them where appropriate critical comments and suggestions for future interpretive exploration. While no claim is

³ Benjamin Kilbourne, "Dreams," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 4, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), 482.

made for comprehensiveness, this is perhaps the first time that so many interpretations of so many differing stripes have been gathered together as the focus of one study.

Why has Perpetua's dream account attracted such interest? Possible reasons include its antiquity, its length, its detail, its directness, its assumed female authorship and the probability that it is a writing by, as well as about, a martyr. There is also much merit in Kate Cooper's assertion that it is because "The image of the death of a young woman bears within it such evocative power that it is peculiarly vulnerable not only to contesting voices who wish to annex its power, but also to a kind of rhetorical outward spiral, gathering significance as it attracts to itself concerns beyond its point of origin."⁴ Stated another way, interpreters of Perpetua's dreams, from the third century to the present, have sought to empower themselves and their special interests by incorporating--and sometimes forcing--their particular notions and speculations into the substance of Perpetua's oneiric imagination. In doing so they have contributed to the construction of an ever-growing superstructure far more complex, elaborate and maze-like than the original account of the dreams. There is nothing unusual or uncommon about this. Paul Ricoeur has observed that with any written discourse, "the author's intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide" and that "It is part of the meaning of a text to be given to an indefinite number of readers and, therefore, of interpretations."⁵ Perpetua's dream text may also be seen as a "classic" in the sense of David Tracy's definition; that it discloses

⁴ Kate Cooper, "The Voice of the Victim: Gender, Representation and Early Christian Martyrdom," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 80 (Autumn 1998): 147.

⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Ft. Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 29; 31-2.

“permanent possibilities of meaning and truth.”⁶ Interpreters are drawn to Perpetua both because she herself was a visionary and because her text contains attributes which challenge and provoke us, overflowing with what Tracy calls an “excess of meaning” which “demands constant interpretation.”⁷

But are all interpretations, all possibilities of meaning equally valid? Tracy additionally calls for explicit “criteria of appropriateness” by which interpreters may be judged critically without forfeiting either broad public discourse or a pluralism of ideas.⁸ In this thesis, I will refer to these criteria and note that the sometimes dogmatic stances which many interpreters adopt may tell us more about their own thinking, belief systems and biases than they do about Perpetua’s dreams, and that one always should be on guard against what S. R. F. Price calls the “problem of the imposition of modern theory on other societies.”⁹ I will employ Price’s dictum as a criterion of appropriateness even while allowing, as Tracy does, that every interpreter “comes to any reading of the text as a subject with a certain preunderstanding of the subject matter of the text; certain personal questions, opinions, responses, expectations, even desires, fears and hopes are present in that preunderstanding.”¹⁰ Interpreters must consider historical authenticity regardless of their preunderstandings. If they do so, we can accept the proposition that the text may have multiple “correct” meanings, with each interpretive community asking its own questions of Perpetua’s dreams across the boundaries of time and discipline, and then

⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 68.

⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ S.R.F. Price, “The Future of Dreams: From Freud to Artemidorus,” *Past & Present* 113 (November 1986): 36.

¹⁰ Tracy, 118.

providing answers which meet its needs and objectives. While multiple readings may appear initially to create doubt and confusion and suggest that there is no single satisfactory interpretation, one may also argue that it is in the very plurality of opinion that the truth lies. That is, we may find that it is through intelligent discourse and constant reconstruction and reinterpretation that the text lives, gains its vitality and continues to inspire us. And we, in turn, may be so stimulated by the varied interpretations that we find new meanings in the text ourselves and devise our own hermeneutic.

Questions of multiple interpretations and criteria of appropriateness occur not only in circumstances involving the study of ancient texts, but also in settings that one might at first consider far removed, such as in the worlds of fiduciary investment management and of institutional boards of trustees. My ministry as a trustee and my practice as a fund manager have taught me that the same preunderstandings which Tracy addresses in a theological context exist as well in an administrative context. That is, individual trustees do not confront institutional problems and opportunities in a vacuum; each trustee brings to his or her decision making the same personal biases and “desires, fears, and hopes” which Tracy finds in the interpreters of the classics. Thus, a study of the interpretations of Perpetua and her dreams can inform my ministry as a trustee and in turn benefit the institutions which I serve.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, we will examine the challenges of the Perpetua text itself; in Chapter Two we will consider the importance of dreams and dream theories in the ancient world; Chapter Three explores the modern interpretations of Perpetua’s dreams; Chapter Four presents my own alternative interpretation, focusing on the use of

women's dreams as a means of empowerment. In Chapter Five I will explore how the lessons learned from the study of Perpetua's dreams have impacted my ministry as a trustee and fund manager. I will propose that there is an analogy between Perpetua the visionary, aware of responsibilities to her religious community, and the trustee as visionary, aware of responsibilities to his or her institution.

The Text

"The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas"¹¹ is a narrative that has been described as "part panegyric, part (auto)biography, part exemplum, part recollection of visionary experience."¹² This multiform genre is not unusual in martyr narratives. Donald Attwater has written that "of the numerous written accounts of the early martyrs...[m]any are wholly fictitious; others are a combination of history and legend, and the respective elements cannot always be disentangled easily, or at all."¹³ The work was probably composed in Latin, although there is a minority view which sees stylistic evidence for a Greek original. This could indicate that Perpetua was literate in both languages. The text can be divided into four sections: (i) an introduction by an anonymous editor, (ii) Perpetua's story and dreams "according to her own ideas and in the way that she herself wrote it down" (*Pass.* 2. 3), (iii) a vision of Saturus (another prisoner) and (iv) an editor's concluding description of what occurred after Perpetua's death.

¹¹ Herbert Musurillo, trans., "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas" in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 106-131. All references to the "Martyrdom" hereafter are to Musurillo's English translation of the Latin *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* and unless otherwise noted are cited in the text as "*Pass.*".

¹² Elizabeth Castelli, *Visions and Voyeurism: Holy Women and the Politics of Sight in Early Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: Center for Hermeneutical Studies, 1994), 10.

¹³ Donald Attwater, *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 11.

Since we will be dealing principally with the second section, it may be useful at this point to present a spare outline of the dreams themselves. Perpetua's first dream involves her avoiding a dragon, climbing a ladder, seeing a white haired shepherd in an immense garden and tasting some cheese which the shepherd offers her. Her second vision recalls her dead brother Dinocrates, who is living in a dark place, thirsty but unable to drink from a nearby pool of water. A third dream, also about Dinocrates, now has him able to drink, cured by prayer of "a cancer of the face" (*Pass.* 7. 25) and playing happily like a child. The fourth vision finds Perpetua in an arena, about to fight an Egyptian; she is undressed, assumes the likeness of a man, defeats her opponent and goes up to "a man of marvelous stature" who kisses her and says "Peace be with you, my daughter!" (*Pass.* 10.13).

Most recent scholarship accepts the authenticity of Perpetua's authorship of the dream sections, although as Peter Nolan is quick to observe, "the heat of that conviction belies the fact that the evidence, though strong, is nonetheless circumstantial."¹⁴ Much of the support for Perpetua as the actual author rests on the uniqueness of the work; for as Nolan expresses it, "if one cannot find either previous uses of the images and themes in the tradition, what [would] the counterfeiter [be] drawing on?"¹⁵ Others, such as Peter Habermehl, cite the particularity of Perpetua's experiences, the intimacy and immediacy of her language, the text's unusual historic specificity and the peculiarities of Perpetua's Latin as indicative of her composition.¹⁶ A skeptic, however, might argue that a creative pseudepigrapher of the same place and time could have

¹⁴ Edward Peter Nolan, *Cry Out and Write: A Feminine Poetics of Revelation* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35. Nolan discusses at some length Habermehl's evidence for Perpetua's authorship.

been just as original in both voice and style. Since an editor wrote parts of the work, logic dictates that we at least question whether an editor had a hand in the entire work. If so, who was the editor and what might have been his or her motives? Most scholars avoid the question, referring only to an anonymous (presumably male) redactor; some, including Johannes Quasten and Berthold Altaner,¹⁷ favor Tertullian, and one, David M. Scholer, opines that the editor was “very possibly a woman,” but neither ventures a name nor explains why he holds this opinion.¹⁸ From another perspective, Cooper writes that, as is often the case in martyr stories, “The voice of the author and the voice of the martyr are often difficult to distinguish from one another” and claims that this is usually the author’s intention.¹⁹ As long as there is some confusion between the two, the author shares the martyr’s “supremely authoritative voice” and benefits from the martyr’s heightened position.²⁰ Such intentional imitation of the author’s voice by the redactor makes it even harder to separate one from the other. Further, the repeated notation by the editor that “the entire account of her ordeal is her own” (*Pass.* 2. 3) suggests a certain lack of conviction on that very point, a fear that perhaps even in the third century there were already doubters that Perpetua was the real author. One is reminded of Joanna Dewey’s contention, albeit in another context, that “prescriptive statements are evidence that the opposite behavior is occurring.”²¹ The more the editor insists on Perpetua’s authorship, the more cause the suspicious reader has to question it. Such

¹⁷ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1950), 181. Berthold Altaner, *Patrology*, trans. Hilda Graef (New York: Hader and Hader, 1960), 249.

¹⁸ David M. Scholer, “‘And I Was A Man’: The Power and Problem of Perpetua,” *Daughters of Sarah* (Sept/Oct 1989): 11.

¹⁹ Cooper, 148.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Joanna Dewey, “From Oral Stories to Written Text” in *Women’s Sacred Scripture*, Concilium 1998/3, ed. Kwok Pui-Lan and Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza (London: SCM Press, 1998), 26.

insistence could be a broad hint that the editor is covering his or her tracks.

Why is the question of authorship important? One could argue that the quest for definitive proof of authorship of any ancient text is both a futile and meaningless exercise. Unless one uncovers an attested holographic manuscript of a particular writing, there will always be doubters. And since it is the written and published text rather than the living individual writer that speaks to us today, need we even be concerned with knowing the identity of the “real author”? Would the *Iliad* or *Hamlet* be less compelling if Homer or Shakespeare were not the true authors? Perhaps not. For as Tracy observes, “It is the work, not the artist, which must receive the attention of the interpreter.”²² But in the case of Perpetua’s dreams, authorship is important because if the dreams were not truly Perpetua’s, or if they were in large part redacted, much recent interpretation, particularly from the feminist and psychological points of view, must be suspect. For example, a dream account written by Tertullian, and only attributed to Perpetua, could hardly be given the same weight by a Freudian or feminist as an account actually written by Perpetua herself. The main points would be lost. Tertullian was a man, Perpetua a woman. Theories based on sexuality or female empowerment applicable to a woman author would be of dubious value if it were discovered that the author was a man. One would be analyzing a man’s idea of a woman’s dream rather than a woman’s dream itself. Cecil Robeck is not one who favors a claim for Tertullian, yet he agrees that “more study is necessary” to settle the question of authorship.²³ W. H. Shewring is one of several scholars who have been willing to accept the possibility of Tertullian as narrator or redactor, but not as the author of the

²² Tracy, 125.

²³ Robeck, 17.

dream sequences. In an analysis of the clausulae of the text, he finds that "The redactor's prose is the rhythmical prose of a practiced writer" while the dream prose has "metrically harsher endings" and rhythms that are "sufficiently different from the redactor's to make it reasonably certain that her narrative was never revised by him."²⁴ Timothy Barnes concurs, observing that "The style of the *Passion* has, it is true, affinities with Tertullian's writings. But the striking similarities occur almost entirely in the exordium and the epilogue."²⁵

One must also bear in mind that the concept of authorship in antiquity was quite different from the concept of authorship today. While Shewring's syntactic dissection of the text must be given some weight, we know that ancient writings were often attributed to those whose name, rank, position or special experience would enhance the composition's authority. A dream of an honored martyr would carry more weight and meaning in the world of the early third century than one of an ordinary North African Christian, or even of a recognized religious leader, such as Tertullian. Additionally, several different contributors may ultimately have had a part in the writing of a document; events may have been reported in a manner which would reflect their views or those of later copyists or editors rather than the actuality of the person who originally experienced the dream.

Even if we assume that Perpetua was indeed the sole author of the dream sequences, how accurate a reporter was she of her own dreams? This is worth considering because of the importance interpreters place on her every word, finding each one charged with symbolic, hidden, religious or political

²⁴ W. H. Shewring, "Prose Rhythm in the *Passio S. Perpetuae*," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (October 1928): 56-7.

²⁵ Timothy D. Barnes, "Pre-Decian Acta Martyrum," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 19 N.S., part 2 (October 1968): 522.

meanings. Brent D. Shaw observes that Perpetua's dreams "are truly extraordinary in the quality of their reportage."²⁶ Perhaps this extraordinary quality should give us pause. Recording dreams--transferring visions and images into words and onto paper--is a sensitive and exacting business, whether it is done by a contemporary ethnologist, a turn of the century psychiatrist or a third century martyr. There is considerable room for unintentional or uninformed error. When one recalls how difficult it can be to record one's own dreams even under ideal circumstances, one can appreciate the difficulty Perpetua must have faced. She had to remember and transcribe her dreams in the hostile environment of a Carthage jail, awaiting death, surrounded by other prisoners, baited by her captors, all the while worrying about her son, her family and friends. While this could, perhaps, induce even greater focus on the exactitude of the oneiric record, it could also lead to a less than perfect transcription of the dream. And if the text of the dream is distorted, what can one say of the interpretations? One is reminded of the story of the literary scholars who, for decades, sought to interpret the obscure passages of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, only to find that many of the obscurities and ambiguities were created not by Joyce but by errors of the French typographers and printers.

Little has been written about the physical medium of the Perpetua text or about its means of distribution. Yet, as Harry Y. Gamble notes, "The failure to consider the extent to which the physical medium of the written word contributes to its meaning--how its outward aspects inform the way a text is approached and read--perpetuates a largely abstract, often unhistorical, and even

²⁶ Brent D. Shaw, "The Passion of Perpetua," *Past & Present* 139 (May 1993): 26.

anachronistic conception of early Christian literature and its transmission.”²⁷ Gamble’s thesis is that a bibliographic inquiry into ancient writings, together with a discussion of the related issue of literacy, will enhance our comprehension of texts in general and assist us in placing them in their historic life situation. The medium on which a work was written and its subsequent manner of publication, distribution and readership are seen to be clues to “the social attitudes, motives, and contexts that sustained its life and shaped its meaning.”²⁸ Such clues may be particularly helpful when one attempts to analyze Perpetua’s dreams on the basis of a written record that has its footing in a specific locus and time. It is for this reason that an excursus into Gamble’s argument is worthwhile.

Since texts have been a part of Christianity from its earliest days, a naive student might well assume that there must be a host of studies dealing with the question of Christian literacy. Not so, claims Gamble, who contends that “The question has rarely been raised and has never been explored by historians of early Christianity.”²⁹ He remedies this situation with a closely-reasoned argument, concluding that early Christian literacy was equal to, or perhaps slightly less than, literacy in the greater Greco-Roman society; that is, about 10-15 percent. He supports this premise by noting that “Christianity attracted a socially diverse membership, representing a cross section of Roman society” and therefore it is logical to believe that it had a similar literacy rate. If anything, Christian literacy might have been somewhat less because of “a tendency...to neglect education in the interest of fideism, otherworldliness, or acquiescent

²⁷ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 42.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

orthodoxy.”³⁰ The acceptance of Gamble’s proposition still leaves at least one unanswered question: Was the extent of literacy equal across the map of early Christianity, or did percentages differ from place to place, say from Carthage to Rome? This is a useful topic to pursue inasmuch as any given text is produced not in a vague, generalized Greco-Roman society but in a specific geography, in the case of Perpetua’s story in Mediterranean North Africa. If Perpetua did write the dream text herself, whom did she write it for? Her fellow prisoners, her family, the local Christian community, a wider audience? How many of her intended readers were educated enough to understand and interpret the nuances of a dream account? How many of them would have preserved texts at home or had access to libraries to which a text might be brought? The expected readership may have influenced the form and method of the composition as well as the specific details included in the dream accounts. For example, one might well describe a dream experience one way if it were meant to be read as an inspirational document and treasured by beleaguered coreligionists and another way if it were meant to be a personal legacy to one’s infant son.

If most Christians could not read or write, they were still able to benefit from written texts. This is because the nature of reading and writing was dramatically different in ancient times from what we experience today. Reading in the early centuries of the common era almost always meant reading aloud, and often to an audience. Therefore, Gamble notes, “the illiterate had access to literacy in a variety of public settings”; Christians in particular were exposed to the oral presentation of written texts since “an essential element of Christian

³⁰ Ibid., 6.

liturgical gatherings was the reading of scripture.”³¹ Familiarity with texts, then, did not require the ability to read oneself. This does not indicate that early Christianity was based principally on oral tradition. In fact, Gamble appears to argue the opposite, that Christianity was very much a significant producer and user of written materials but that, through reading aloud, “texts were routinely converted into the oral mode.”³² The sharp distinction which we make in modern times between the written and spoken word was blurred in antiquity. An illiterate Christian could be quite well-acquainted with a host of texts which he heard at readings in a church, public, or private setting. Even those who were literate probably had texts read to them or read those texts aloud themselves. As an example, Gamble quotes Papias and Galen to the effect that a “living voice” is preferable to the written word. It is fair to assume that both bishop and physician meant that having texts read aloud was superior to reading them silently and not that the written text itself was in any way inferior. Understanding literacy and the fact that texts were read aloud helps us to understand that Perpetua’s dream accounts may well have been “said” before they were written and that once written they may have been subject to revision for oral presentation. This may have been done, one imagines, for convenience of presentation, to enhance the story’s vividness or to convey a specific theological or political point of view. Admittedly, there is no evidence, paleographic or otherwise, that this occurred. However, it is worth speculating upon if one is concerned with the question of whether a textual description of dream symbols is an accurate depiction of the symbols as they appeared in the dream experience itself, a critical issue for all interpreters, ancient or modern.

³¹ Ibid., 8.

³² Ibid., 30.

The questions of authorship, literacy and composition are linked. Musurillo notes that “If we may believe the anonymous author” (that is, the narrator), Perpetua’s account was “written from the martyrs’ own words.”³³ But in Musurillo’s translation the way the narrator actually puts it is “according to her own ideas and in the way that she herself wrote it down.” (*Pass.* 2. 3). There appear to be contradictions here, or at least the possibility of confusion. Was the account written *from* Perpetua’s words but not *by* Perpetua herself? Was it written from her *ideas* or from her *words*? Did she write the text as we have it or did she transmit it to another who wrote it *in the way*, that is the style or manner, of Perpetua? With Gamble’s concerns in mind, we must ask at the outset whether Perpetua was literate enough to write things down. Gamble’s estimation that only 10-15% of the Greco-Roman world was literate, if correct, seems to put the burden of proof on those arguing for Perpetua’s literacy. Based on the percentages, it is more likely than not that any given individual in the early third century was illiterate. However, the text tells us that Perpetua was a woman “of good family and upbringing” (*Pass.* 2.1) and--at least from a modern sociological viewpoint--one may expect that literacy was higher among families of this sort, thus raising the odds a bit. Joyce E. Salisbury writes that “The use of language in Perpetua’s diary reveals her to be well educated” and finds evidence that “Roman families valued education for their daughters.”³⁴ Perhaps this boosts the chances of Perpetua’s literacy even further, but only if the “language” is indeed Perpetua’s.

Salisbury may be correct about language and about education, points in favor of Perpetua’s literacy, but she assumes without question that the diary was

³³ Musurillo, xxv.

³⁴ Salisbury, 7.

indeed written by Perpetua and in her hand. Gamble has taught us to be suspicious of such assumptions. We know that “writing” may mean something quite different from our modern conception of it; it could include dictation to someone or collaboration with someone. It is also possible that Perpetua may have been the author of her story in that she lived it and spoke of it, but that nevertheless the text was written by someone else and that the phrase “she herself wrote it down” is no more than a literary convention of the time. We know that authorship was rarely exclusive in antiquity. Any anonymous early Christian, writing about Perpetua’s martyrdom, would feel justified by convention to attribute the story to her both as a tribute and as a means of making the text more important and dramatic. We have seen this convention used, to cite an obvious example, in those letters attributed to St. Paul but not written by him. We must also question what writing materials Perpetua would have normally used (parchment, for example?) and whether such materials would have been readily available to her in prison, even if she had the help of her family and fellow Christians on the outside. And if the manuscript was written in prison, how was it brought out and by whom and for what reason? We may never know the answers to these questions, but they are worth asking as they lead us to reflect not only on the Perpetua text itself, but also on the historical environment in which it was written. In so doing, we assure that our own personal and theoretical predispositions do not lead us too far from the realities of 203 CE.

Musurillo and others have based their translations on nine manuscripts in Latin and one in Greek. It appears that the earliest Latin manuscript extant was uncovered in 1663 at the library of Montecassino; a twelfth-century Greek

version was found over two hundred years later, in 1889, at the library of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.³⁵ If, for argument's sake, we accept Perpetua's original authorship, we still must pause over how her words might have been changed over the history of the various manuscript versions. We know for certain that an editor had a hand in the sections which frame Perpetua's narrative; how many other editors or scribes might have added to or deleted from the text from the time of its original composition to the time of the earliest manuscript which we have? Gamble tells us that few texts were copied perfectly and that intentional and unintentional scribal and editorial changes may have been the rule rather than the exception. In the North African environment of the time, in a climate of both political and religious change, there may have been reason for the molding of the text in this way or that to suit the goals of the editor or transmitter of the story. This would not be unusual as the alteration or rephrasing of texts was common in ancient times. But it is also true that the only Perpetua we have today is the Perpetua of the text and that quarrels about authorship must ultimately remain unresolved, save for the discovery of new evidence.

The distribution and dissemination of the text must have been rapid. Salisbury writes that after Perpetua's death, "she and her companions would have immediately been accorded the veneration they had earned."³⁶ Soon thereafter, accounts of Perpetua's martyrdom would have been circulated, requiring multiple copies of the text. Salisbury notes that by the time of

³⁵ See Pio Franchi De' Cavalieri, *La Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Rome: Roemische Quartalschrift, 1896), 10. For a discussion of the various early manuscript versions of the *Passio* and issues of their priority, see Jacqueline Amat, *Passion de Perpetue et de Felicite suivi des Actes*, Sources Chretiennes 417 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1996), 51-66.

³⁶ Salisbury, 170.

Constantine's reign the anniversary of the martyrdom was part of the church calendar and that by the time of Augustine "People [in Carthage] heard the account of her passion and venerated the text almost as if it were Scripture."³⁷ The implication is that if the text was accorded such veneration it may also have been almost as widely distributed, particularly in Carthage and environs, as Scripture. With the increase of the text's popular impact and circulation, Perpetua's original story would have been "explained and modified by churchmen who wanted to shape the vision offered by the powerful and personal account of the martyr."³⁸ And so possible changes, as well as explanations and interpretations of the text, including the dream account and the symbols contained therein, would have proliferated.

In any study of the Perpetua text one must also address the issue of translation. Some contemporary interpreters of the dream text have chosen to do their own translations, usually based on either the critical Latin and Greek edition of van Beek³⁹ or the more recent Latin work of Musurillo. Others have relied solely on Musurillo's English translation. Still others have preferred the English of W. H. Shewring, Armitage Robinson, Rosemary Rader or unnamed translators. And there are French, German and Italian translations as well. The question of translation is important because there is a possibility that an interpreter may see a dream symbol--Christian, Freudian or otherwise--or particularly pregnant phrase that exists only because of his or her own choice in finding a modern language equivalent for a Latin word.

One example, with broad interpretive significance, involves Perpetua's

³⁷ Ibid. See also, Quasten, 181.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ C. I. M. I. van Beek, trans., "Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis", *Florilegium Patristicum Fasciculus* 43 (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1938).

words “et facta sum masculus” (*Pass.* 10. 7), used in a section of the dream narrative in which she is preparing to fight an Egyptian in the arena. Should this be read as Musurillo has it, “and suddenly I was a man,” or as Kenneth Fisher argues, merely “that Perpetua had become ‘manly’.”⁴⁰ The former would lead one to an interpretation involving literal gender-crossing and a host of observations involving female-male transformations in biblical and other religious literature, while the latter might indicate only that Perpetua’s strength increased so that she was, figuratively speaking, as strong as a man. Different translations clearly may lead to different interpretations. Yet another instance in which translation becomes significant is cited by Frederick C. Klawiter. In this example, Perpetua has just had a dream in which her dead brother Dinocrates appears to her in a suffering state. Klawiter translates “et feci pro illo orationem die et nocte gemens et lacrimans ut mihi donaretur” (*Pass.* 7.10) as “And I prayed for him day and night, sighing and shedding tears, that he might be pardoned for me.”⁴¹ Musurillo expresses the Latin as “And I prayed for my brother day and night with tears and sighs that this favor might be granted me.” Klawiter is eager to establish Perpetua as a Montanist confessor with the priestly power to pardon sins; by using the conclusive “pardoned for me” instead of the far more equivocal “granted me” he advances his cause. The point is that if an interpreter of Perpetua’s dreams seeks to buttress his or her case by stressing the importance of a particular word or phrase in English, it may be advisable to ask whether there is any other reasonable alternative to

⁴⁰ Kenneth Fisher, “Transsexual or Gender Themes in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*?,” unpublished paper, 13.

⁴¹ Frederick C. Klawiter, “The Role of Martyrdom and Persecution in Developing the Priestly Authority of Women in Early Christianity: A Case Study of Montanism,” *Church History* 49 (September 1980): 257.

the interpreter's translation of that word or phrase. One might further ask whether it is prudent to stake an entire interpretation of a dream text on a single word or words when there is a question as to the word's original meaning.

In this chapter we have attempted to show how issues of text and original authorial intent are important in assessing whether an interpreter has satisfied a criterion of appropriateness. The argument is not to disallow imaginative interpretation, but to assure that it is rooted in history and in what factual information we do have. Similarly, we will see in Chapter Five that a ministry of trusteeship must also concern itself with issues of appropriateness and must show an awareness of historic and existing institutional dynamics which are much akin to textual analysis. These dynamics include a realization that preunderstandings exist in all interpretive situations, whether scholarly, administrative, or pastoral. While we will primarily explore the common factors shared by all interpreters, we will also touch on a second point, that of the trustee as visionary. Perpetua's real dreams (as well as those of the other women considered in Chapter Four) allowed her to disseminate her ideas; the figurative dreams of a trustee can do the same.

traditions throughout history” and that religious dreamers have “drawn upon their dreams for spiritual guidance, to heal their suffering, to overcome their troubles, and to pursue a good, fulfilling life.”⁴² Scholars have noted that dreams and dream interpretations are critical elements of seminal texts as varied as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the Bible. In biblical times, little distinction was made between the dreaming and waking states; both were commonly held to be equally real and equally meaningful. Louis M. Savary has commented on the “central place dreams held in the lives of the Hebrew prophets, leaders and people” and how “the God of Israel often directed the history of the chosen people by means of dreams.”⁴³ Hebrew Bible dream examples abound; a sampling might include Abraham’s offspring dream (Gen 15: 12-16), Jacob’s ladder dream (Gen 28: 10-17), Joseph’s dreams and interpretations of dreams (Gen 37: 5-11; 40: 5-19; 41: 1-32), Solomon’s dream of wisdom (1 Kings 3: 5-15) and dreams in the life of Daniel (Dan 2-4). New Testament examples might include Joseph’s dream regarding Mary (Mat 1: 20-21), Peter’s dream/vision (Acts 10: 3-20), and Paul’s night dreams/visions (Acts 16:9; 18:9; 23:11; 27:23).

Dreams in Greco-Roman times, for Christian and pagan alike, were the subject of much debate. The majority view, though by no means uncontested, was that they were an authoritative means of communication between the deity and humankind. If properly interpreted, dreams were held to be prophetic and revelatory of God’s will. In such cases, for Christians, it was God himself who would provide the interpretation and the proofs attesting to the dream’s divine

⁴² Kelly Bulkeley, *The Wilderness of Dreams: Exploring the Religious Meaning of Dreams in Modern Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), xi, 3.

⁴³ Louis M. Savary, Patricia H. Berne and Strephon Kaplan Williams, *Dreams and Spiritual Growth: A Christian Approach to Dreamwork* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 13, 3.

CHAPTER TWO

PERPETUA'S DREAMS IN CONTEXT: DREAM INTERPRETATION IN ANCIENT TIMES

Until now we have dealt with Perpetua's dreams as part of a specific ancient text, "The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas," with all the notions of authorship, dissemination, mediation, and translation which relate to such a text. We have done so because of the importance interpreters have invested in Perpetua's exact written words as they have come down to us. We have thought it valuable to investigate the origin of these words and the trustworthiness of the English texts as we have them precisely because theories about Perpetua and the meaning of her dreams depend so much on presuppositions regarding the composition and accuracy of the dream narrative. If you question one you must question the other. There are, of course, other equally compelling approaches to Perpetua's dreams. One of these is to set her dreams in the larger context of dream theory in ancient times. Perpetua experienced her dreams in a specific time and place and it is reasonable to contend that she and the earliest mediators of her text were influenced by what the culture of the ancient world thought and said about dreams.

In the introductory pages of his book, *The Wilderness of Dreams*, Kelly Bulkeley observes that dreams "have played an important role in religious

origin.⁴⁴ Such dreams, however, were uncommon. Most dreams were thought to be lacking in any special religious content and were deemed mere natural phenomena; and “superstitious divination through dreams” was “severely forbidden by God as an immoral practice.”⁴⁵ For pagans, the dream was an essential nexus in which “The change of reality-level acts as a cushion to soften the contact between god and man.”⁴⁶ That is, without the shield a dream provided to the dreamer, the shock of the proximity of the gods would have been too great for a mortal to handle. Of course, one must also acknowledge that there is a problem in accepting any broad generalization about dreams and dream interpretation in Mediterranean antiquity. Robert M. Berchman quite wisely warns that “In complex cultures such as these one should not expect to find one attitude toward dreams. ...Indeed, it is not possible to talk of a general ancient attitude toward dreams and their interpretation without differentiating between epochs, locales, and their cultural and social environments.”⁴⁷

With this statement in mind, we will look at several ancient writers, both pagan and Christian, and attempt to determine what each thought generally about dreams, where dreams came from, and what dreams meant. The benefit of such an exercise is not only to test Berchman’s proposition, but also to place Perpetua’s dreams in an historical continuum and to observe what ancient dream interpreters might have thought (or did think) about her dreams.

⁴⁴ A. M. Cuk, “Dream” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol.4 (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967), 1055.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Andrew Karp, “Prophecy and Divination in Archaic Greek Literature” in Robert M. Berchman, ed., *Mediators of the Divine: Horizons of Prophecy, Divination, Dreams and Theurgy in Mediterranean Antiquity* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 21.

⁴⁷ Robert M. Berchman, “Arcana Mundi: Magic and Divination in the *De Somnis* of Philo of Alexandria” in *Mediators*, 116-7.

Aristotle

Not all ancient writers were thoroughly convinced of the veracity of dreams, nor did they all agree with the generally accepted perception that dreams were sent by the deity. In the introduction to his translation of Aristotle's three essays on dreams, David Gallop notes that "Long before Aristotle's day the belief that dreams were objective visions of the supernatural had been challenged by rationalist thinkers of the early fifth century [BCE]."⁴⁸ Gallop cites Xenophanes and Heraclitus as two such thinkers. But Aristotle is perhaps the most strident of the ancients in his repudiation of the established, traditional appraisal of dreams as predictive and sent by the gods. Aristotle argues that dreams are creative, works of the human imagination that serve no purpose and have no oracular function. Reading Aristotle on dreams, one is led to agree with Gallop that Aristotle conceives of dreams as "private episodes in consciousness" and that he believed that "correspondences between dreams and future events are mostly coincidence."⁴⁹

Aristotle's argument against the god-sent, predictive or instructive value of dreams rests in part on his assessment of those who have such dreams. In "On Divination Through Sleep" he writes that "apart from its further irrationality, the idea that it is God who sends dreams, and yet that he sends them not to the best and most intelligent, but to random people, is absurd."⁵⁰ That common people may have meaningful, inspired dreams seems to bother Aristotle. One cannot resist speculating that he might be concerned about losing some of his

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Aristotle on Sleep and Dreams*, trans. and intro. David Gallop (Lewiston, NY: Broadview Press, 1990), 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

own authority as a philosopher if the ordinary person in the street could, through dreams, claim the authority and wisdom of the gods. Aristotle is uncomfortable with the possibility that dreams may empower “random people” and thus deprive the philosopher of his superiority. If dreams are not sent by the gods, where does Aristotle think they come from? Patricia Cox Miller’s reading is that “For Aristotle, sleep and the dreams that occur during it are essentially products of the digestive process, during which heat rises and falls through the body.”⁵¹ Aristotle sees dreams as daemonic, as nature is, and as belonging to the natural, physical order of things. “During sleep,” he contends, “judgment is disabled from exercising its function. Thus, a perceptual remnant bearing some resemblance to a sense-impression is mistaken for the real one.”⁵²

What of those people who have dreams which do come true and which correctly forecast the future? Aristotle finds them no different than lucky gamblers. He reasons that it is “because they experience many movements of every kind that they just happen to encounter sights resembling real events, being fortunate in those, like certain people who play at odds and evens.”⁵³ Without denying the importance of Aristotle’s observations, one wonders whether his conclusions do not rest as much on his personal desire to see the world as a rational place as they do on objective, experimental study. If Aristotle wants to retain his power as a philosopher, he cannot brook the illogical or the supernatural aspects of dreams, particularly if the purveyors of this illogic are common people. Aristotle may be shaping his dream theories in answer to his own needs and to justify his own position in society. The authority of the

⁵¹ Patricia Cox Miller, *Dreams in Late Antiquity : Studies in the Imagination of a Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 43.

⁵² Aristotle, 97.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107.

philosopher increases as the authority of the dreamer declines.

Aristotle's dream theory remained a minority view in ancient times, although it had its important adherents. Cicero, as Miller notes, "uses Aristotelian psychobiological arguments to explain the dream as a naturalistic phenomenon" and criticizes the practitioners of dream interpretation as mongers of "an inexact pseudo-science that trades on human credulity and an erroneous set of assumptions about the gods."⁵⁴ Cicero illustrates his distrust of dream interpreters by citing cases in which "the interpretation of dreams is geared more toward displaying the [false] sagacity of the interpreter than it is toward demonstrating the connections between dreaming and natural law."⁵⁵ Like Aristotle, Cicero bristles at the idea of the untutored dream diviner possessing authority or seeking power beyond his station through dream interpretation. While Aristotle's and Cicero's arguments have force, they are also somewhat *ad hominem*. Dream interpreting is fraudulent because dream interpreters are uneducated and common. Dreams don't come from the gods because the gods wouldn't want to communicate with ignorant people. Would it be too unhistorical to call both Aristotle and Cicero elitist? One can imagine them debunking Perpetua's dreams as devoid of any importance because the dreamer herself was neither a philosopher nor a man of letters, but a mere North African woman.

Asclepius

Miller does find one area in which Cicero "was willing to allow dreams a useful function," and that was medicine.⁵⁶ Followers of the Greek god Asclepius

⁵⁴ Miller, 44.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 46.

had been visiting temples dedicated to him in Epidaurus for curative purposes ever since the mid-fourth century BCE, and continued to do so well into the Christian era. In their two volume study of the testimonies to Asclepius, Emma and Ludwig Edelstein point out that Asclepius's popularity was due to the god's ability to heal through dreams, a power which even some Christians admitted was real. "Of all the Greek gods," they write, "he persisted longest in exercising his full and undiminished power," even after Christianity was made the state's religion.⁵⁷ Asclepius was thought to heal through dreams which believers incubated while sleeping within the temple precincts. Miller describes the process thus:

After entering the place of incubation, the sufferers were told to be silent and go to sleep. ...conversations [were] held the next morning among suppliants and between suppliants and temple wardens concerning the dreams that had occurred during the night. If a healing dream had been given, a thank-offering was due to the god.⁵⁸

Evidence of the curative powers of dreams abounds at Epidaurus in the form of stelae. The Edelsteins have recorded many of these and we may consider three as typical examples.

Pandarus, a Thessalian, who had marks on his forehead. He saw a vision as he slept. When day came he got up...and saw his face free of the marks.⁵⁹

Euhippus had had for six years the point of a spear in his jaw. As he was sleeping in the Temple the god extracted the spearhead and gave it to him in his hands.⁶⁰

Alcetas of Halieis. The blind man saw a dream. It seemed to him

⁵⁷ Emma J. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), 138.

⁵⁸ Miller, 111.

⁵⁹ Edelstein and Edelstein, vol. 1, 231.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

that the god came up to him and with his fingers opened his eyes, and that he first saw the trees in the sanctuary. At daybreak he walked out sound.⁶¹

In most cases the dreamer saw Asclepius in his sleep and the god himself performed the cure. The Edelsteins remind us that "In doing all this the god did not act contrary to any of the established scientific or philosophical theories... . He simply acted like a god."⁶² If people (i) believed in the gods, (ii) came to the sanctuary with the intention of dreaming, (iii) had a dream, and (iv) were subsequently cured, it is understandable that the cure be attributed to the power of the god. Or as the Edelsteins put it, it is natural that "anybody who in a world in which the gods were still alive should visit a temple and wait for a divine vision would have such dreams."⁶³

How did the cures occur? The dreamed god shared his power with the sufferer and the dream empowered the sick to cure themselves. The transference of power acted as a kind of autosuggestion which stimulated the healing process. This is one possible explanation of how these cures actually took place. Other suggestions--that therapies were secretly administered by physicians, that the priests fraudulently impersonated the god and employed natural remedies, that the cures never took place and the stelae were redactions of old oral tradition--may be interesting, but are not supported by much evidence. The Edelsteins suggest that the dreams and cures "can be accounted for only against the background of the society in which they happened... . Asclepius' healings, then, being the deeds of a Greek god, must

⁶¹ Ibid., 233.

⁶² Ibid., vol. 2, 157-8.

⁶³ Ibid., 163.

be interpreted in relation to Greek life and Greek medicine.”⁶⁴ In other words, the dreamer, the dream, the interpreter and the recording of the cure are all shaped by the society and culture in which the event took place. They cannot be understood outside of that context. We might apply this suggestion to Perpetua and her dreams as well. If we are to understand the meaning of her dreams to Perpetua and to the Christian community of Carthage, we must first understand the life and character of that community. Perpetua’s dream of the curing of her brother Dinocrates is similar to the dream experiences of those who visited the temple of Asclepius. As a Christian, Perpetua may have believed that her dead brother would have been made whole in the afterlife because of her prayers. What she believed, what was accepted as true by her community, was what she dreamed. We are once again led back to the importance of the historical setting of an event to its subsequent recording and later interpretation.

Artemidorus

The *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus is a series of five books written in the second century CE which set out to understand and categorize dream material. Artemidorus’s approach to dreams has been called rational and practical; the latter quality is well illustrated by his remark that one should “offer two interpretations whenever he is uncertain as to which one is correct.”⁶⁵ In the introduction to his translation of the *Oneirocritica*, Robert White observes that Artemidorus dodges thorny questions such as whether or not dreams come from the gods and instead seeks to devise “a uniform set of laws governing the

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams: Oneirocritica*, trans. and commentary, Robert J. White (Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1975), 9.

dream and a workable system for categorizing dream material.”⁶⁶ Artemidorus is concerned less with the philosophy of dreams--the how and why--and more with their usefulness. His insistence that a good interpreter must know a dreamer’s occupation, where he or she lives, and how accurately a dream has been reported, indicates that he would have approved of the Edelsteins’ plea (noted above in the section on Asclepius) that dreams must be judged against the background of the society in which they occur. Although Artemidorus sought to establish rules for the interpretation of dreams, he was more of a relativist than an absolutist. He is quick to urge the interpreter not to blindly rely on his manual but to “prepare himself from his own resources and to use his native intelligence” to uncover a dream’s meaning.⁶⁷

Much of the *Oneirocritica* reads like a code book or rather a key to a code book. Dreams of salted meat mean delay and postponement; goats are inauspicious; Pluto and Persephone mean good luck; stilts are equated with criminality; a loom signifies a trip abroad, and so on.⁶⁸ But Artemidorus adds to his dream encyclopedia the advice that every interpretation should have plausibility and common sense regardless of the individual symbols decoded. He favors reliance on experience and inference over rote learning, counseling that “the interpretation of dreams is nothing other than the juxtaposition of similarities.”⁶⁹ He develops his own criteria of appropriateness for dream interpretation, embracing the practical and reasonable and maintaining a suspicion of the purely reductionist or fanciful assessment.

A power analysis of Artemidorus and his work indicates a shift in

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 53, 94, 122, 162, 167.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 106.

authority and importance from the dreamer and dream to the interpreter. True, the dreamer's life may be enhanced by the predictive discoveries of his or her dream, and the dream itself is critical because it contains the raw material for analysis. But it is clear that the hero of the *Oneirocritica* is the interpreter and it is the interpreter who benefits most from the specialized knowledge contained in the book. Authority rests with the interpreter, to whom the dreamer goes for explanation and help. Artemidorus, a "dedicated, sometimes shifty, but always personable man"⁷⁰ has made himself the critical element in the dreamer-dream-interpreter triangle. He uses dream analysis to assure his essentiality and to enhance his own worth. In this practice he is the forerunner of the Freudian and Jungian analysts whom we will encounter in Chapter Three.

Can we analyze Perpetua's dreams using Artemidorus' techniques, much as modern interpreters have used the techniques of Freud or Jung to analyze the *Passio*? What might Artemidorus have said about the symbols in Perpetua's dreams? Would he have assigned them any predictive value? Artemidorus would no doubt have been sympathetic to our reservations regarding authorship inasmuch as he insisted that no detail be "added to or omitted from the dream."⁷¹ He would want to make sure that Perpetua's dreams were indeed her own and not, for example, Tertullian's, for he would have been sure to have provided differing interpretations to a young mother and to a well-educated theologian. Since Artemidorus never had the opportunity to interpret Perpetua's dreams, I have attempted an Artemidoran approach myself, matching Perpetua's symbols with explanations from the *Oneirocritica* in order to show the breath of the spectrum of possible interpretations.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁷¹ Ibid., 8.

If we examine the major symbols in Perpetua's first dream using the *Oneirocritica* as a guide, we find the following: (i) The *ladder* signifies travel and change, (ii) *weapons* suggest both discord and courage, (iii) the *dragon* could signify a king and also an enemy, (iv) a *garden* indicates a slowness of time and specifically for a woman, slander, (v) a *shepherd* is an auspicious sign, (vi) *white clothes* have many meanings, but most often signify disturbances or death, (vii) *milk*, too, has many meanings, but usually signifies profit or loss, marriage or death. The purpose of this somewhat naive exercise is to demonstrate that if one reads Perpetua's dream through the eyes of a pagan, one sees only pagan symbols and comes up with a very non-Christian interpretation. For example, based on the above symbol analysis, a pagan dream interpreter familiar with the *Oneirocritica* might have concluded that Perpetua was about to quarrel with her fellow prisoners, leave the prison, reconsider her religious commitment, denounce the Christians, reunite with her husband and live happily ever after. The suggestion is that the interpreter controls the interpretation.

There was no bright line between what we might call the pagan and Christian concept of dreams. Students of dreams from both camps shared an appreciation of the reality of the oneiric imagination and most thought dreams important and relevant to the waking life. It was generally accepted that dreams could contain messages from beyond this world, whether from a deity or another source, and might have value in the waking world, whether as a guide to the future or a predictor of it. Christian attitudes toward dreams were of course influenced by the pagan (and perhaps Jewish) culture with which Christians would have been familiar. Let us now consider the dream notions of

two important early Christian thinkers.

Tertullian

The early Christian community, particularly that of North Africa, put great stock in dreams, believing that it was “in visions that the encounter between the self and the divine takes place.”⁷² As we have seen, dreams were important because they came or could come from God; they could reveal his will and predict the future. They were thought to be an authoritative means of communication between the deity and his creation. Dreams must have been common for Perpetua, who even before her first recorded vision “knew that I could speak with the Lord” (*Pass.* 4. 2). Robeck takes this to mean that “conversing with the Lord was something to which she was already regularly accustomed.”⁷³ And this “conversing” most probably occurred in a dream or trance state. Perpetua’s ability to ask for and receive revelatory dreams may have been enhanced by her position as a confessor, one who was about to be martyred. “Confessors and martyrs of that day were thought to have a unique position before the Lord to ask for certain things and to expect their requests to be granted,” notes Robeck, “and there is no apparent reason why Perpetua would not have been aware of such an idea.”⁷⁴ As a martyr-to-be, Perpetua could ask for a vision and “could converse directly with God.”⁷⁵ Patricia Cox Miller, whose interpretations we will consider later, observes that “persecution and oneiric revelation formed a pair as the imminence of death provoked

⁷² Elizabeth A. Petroff, *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 44.

⁷³ Robeck, 20.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷⁵ Patricia Wilson-Kastner and others, *A Lost Tradition: Women Writers of The Early Church* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1981), 6.

premonitory dreams.”⁷⁶

However, not all early Christians were as sure of the origin, import and meaning of dreams as was Perpetua. Consider, for example, the case of Tertullian. Tertullian and Perpetua share a North African heritage and a late second to early third century historical locus. The names of the two have often been linked, as noted above, as possible joint authors of the *Passio*. But where Perpetua was herself a visionary, a prophetic dreamer who knew with certainty that her dreams came from God and actively employed them in support of her faith, Tertullian approached dreams carefully and analytically, perhaps reflecting his training as a rhetorician and lawyer. In Chapter 45 of “A Treatise on the Soul,” he asks rhetorically “what is the opinion of Christians respecting dreams?”⁷⁷ He provides his answers in the following four chapters, which Joyce Salisbury calls “the first Christian study of the subject.”⁷⁸ Tertullian, as Robeck neatly summarizes him, first argues that sleep is “a natural state, not something of a supernatural character, and as a result it may be described as a ‘reasonable work of God.’”⁷⁹ Second, he maintains that when one is strongly imbued with God’s power, one falls into an ecstatic state. Third, “When both sleep and ecstasy come to a person that person dreams.”⁸⁰ Tertullian accepts dreams as real and as evidence that the soul is active even when the body rests in sleep; the dreamer, therefore, is in full possession of his mental faculties, faculties which in dreams can provide either wisdom or nonsense. In formulating his own dream theory, Tertullian leans on others who have gone

⁷⁶ Miller, 150.

⁷⁷ Tertullian, “A Treatise on the Soul” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 223.

⁷⁸ Salisbury, 95.

⁷⁹ Robeck, 104.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

before him. He surveys the opinions of Epicurus, Homer, Aristotle, and Herodotus on the character of dreams and recounts the recorded dreams of Caesar, Cicero, Socrates and Sophocles. All this is done to buttress his conclusion that there are three categories of dreams.

In the first category are diabolical dreams, “inflicted on us mainly by demons,” which “aim after evil” and show themselves to be “vain, and deceitful, and obscure, and wanton, and impure.”⁸¹ Sometimes such dreams are indeed predictive and come true, but they should always be regarded with suspicion and wariness. He warns that such dangerous dreams may come to people not only “in shrines and temples” (is he thinking of Asclepius?), but also in “our very homes.”⁸² The second category is reserved for dreams that have come from God. These dreams “may be compared to the actual grace of God” and are “honest, holy, prophetic, inspired, instructive, inviting to virtue.”⁸³ It is from this type of dream that “almost the greatest part of mankind get their knowledge of God.”⁸⁴ Perhaps Tertullian’s enthusiasm for this God-sent type of dream may reflect his interest in the New Prophecy movement and Montanus, a subject which we will review in the next section. Tertullian’s third category of dream is a catch-all for dreams that are “neither from God, nor from diabolical inspiration” and cannot be interpreted; they are caused purely by “the ecstatic state and its peculiar conditions.”⁸⁵

Tertullian places himself firmly in the camp that believes dreams to come from a supernatural source outside of the body--whether from God or demon--

⁸¹ Tertullian, 225.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 226.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

and in opposition to the Aristotelian view that dreams are a natural bodily function. He examines the contention that dreams are influenced by the seasons of the year, the time of night, the side one sleeps on, and whether or not one fasts, and concludes by saying that all such statements depend on “ingenious conjecture rather than certain proof.”⁸⁶ Tertullian appears to want to occupy a middle ground where there is room for belief in God-sent dreams but where there is also skepticism about the possibility of dream incubation and rejection of dreams coming from sources other than God. He is silent on the issue of how one actually tells a diabolic dream from a dream sent by God. Does one need an interpreter? Does one need to feel holy or saintly, or, like Perpetua, be a confessor? Do dreams from God differ in symbolic content from demonic dreams? These are questions Tertullian does not answer directly, although one can venture to impute answers to him. In Chapter 55 of “A Treatise on the Soul,” Tertullian deals with the Christian idea of Hades and Paradise and relies on Perpetua for a description of the latter place. His assumption that “the revelation which she received of Paradise”⁸⁷ was accurate indicates that he believed (i) that dreams sent to confessors or martyrs are by their nature true, from God and not demonic; (ii) one does not need a professional interpreter to decode a dream sent by God because its meaning is clear; and (iii) dream evidence is as valid as (or more valid than) waking sensory experience. Although he sees authority in dreams, Tertullian seems to shy away from making that authority his own. At least in “A Treatise on the Soul,” he does not claim for himself any power that can be traced either to

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tertullian, 231. It has been noted that Tertullian incorrectly attributes this dream to Perpetua; the text, at Chapter 4, has it as a vision of Saturus. However, it should not matter for the purpose of demonstrating Tertullian’s position on dreams.

dreams or to their interpretation. In this regard he further separates himself from both earlier (e.g., Artemidorus) and later (e.g., Freud) interpreters who seek to remove the power and authority of the dream from the dreamer and make it their own.

Augustine

Augustine, writing about two hundred years after Tertullian, calls dreams “visitations in sleep” and recounts his own experience of a predictive dream in which

Profuturus, and Privatus, and Servilius, holy men who within my recollection were removed by death from our monastery, spoke to me, and the events of which they spoke came to pass according to their words. Or if it be some other higher spirit that assumes their form and visits our minds, I leave this to the all-seeing eye of Him before whom everything from the highest to the lowest is uncovered.⁸⁸

This shows, as Miller notes, that Augustine had no doubt that the dreams we see in sleep have an independent existence, “even if he was uncertain what that existence is.”⁸⁹ Augustine thought that dreams were instructive and carried God’s teaching, but he could not explain--as Aristotle and Tertullian sought to do--how they occurred, what provoked them, or why they came to certain people, except to say (as in the case of the dreams of his mother) that those who have dreams which reflect God’s teachings must be saintly. “For my part,” he wrote, “I am wholly unable to explain in words how these semblances of material bodies, without any real body, are produced.”⁹⁰ He allows that “it is free to everyone to believe or disbelieve” in the veracity of dreams and that he is

⁸⁸ Augustine, “The Letters of St. Augustin” in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 512.

⁸⁹ Miller, 41.

⁹⁰ Augustine, “Letters,” 514.

open to other explanations of how dreams work.⁹¹ Modestly, he confesses that

as I discover more plainly my inability to account for the ordinary facts of our experience, when awake or asleep, throughout the whole course of our lives, the more do I shrink from venturing to explain what is extraordinary.⁹²

Augustine's honesty and willingness to learn more about dreams are refreshing attributes. His own oneiric experience has convinced him that instructive dreams are real and must come, as does all wisdom, from God. Yet he is open-minded about exactly how this happens.

Augustine's first encounter with dream interpretation may have come from his mother, Monica. In Chapter 11 of the *Confessions*, Augustine tells of a dream which his mother had and then relates that he "tried to put this construction on it."⁹³ In other words, he tried to interpret it. And according to Salisbury, Monica herself "repeatedly interpreted her dreams to her famous son, and he accepted her interpretation because he was sure that her dreams were sent by God."⁹⁴ What about Augustine's interpretation of Perpetua's dreams? We should note in passing, along with Thomas J. Heffernan, that Augustine was not entirely convinced that Perpetua was the actual author of the *Passio*.⁹⁵ He raises a doubt in "On the Soul and Its Origin" where, referring to the *Passio's* author, he indicates that it was Perpetua "or whoever it was that wrote the account."⁹⁶ That "or whoever" suggests that either Augustine may

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 513.

⁹³ Augustine, "The Confessions of St. Augustin" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 67.

⁹⁴ Salisbury, 97.

⁹⁵ Thomas J. Heffernan, "Philology and Authorship in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*" in *Traditio* 50, ed. C. H. Lohr and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), 316.

⁹⁶ Augustine, "On the Soul and Its Origin" in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 320.

have had access to evidence which hinted at a co-author or a different author, or that he was just being overly cautious. Questions of authorship aside, Augustine thought that Perpetua's dream accounts and martyrdom were important enough for him to interpret them and to use them in his sermons.

Salisbury discusses Augustine's commentary on Perpetua's dreams at length. She argues that Augustine in his sermons reshaped Perpetua's narrative to suit his own needs and the needs of a victorious rather than a besieged church community. Salisbury writes that Augustine "used the *Passio* to draw new morals relevant to the fourth century church" and sought to show that "the lessons drawn from the account of a martyrdom also should not contradict social obligations."⁹⁷ Augustine turned what some might consider an anti-establishment Perpetua into an establishment icon, using her life and the authority of her dreams for moral instruction. Let us examine some examples of how Augustine did this. In a sermon delivered at the end of the fourth century on the subject of honoring or disregarding parents, Augustine turns Perpetua's rather radical opposition to her father's wishes into a far tamer and admirable withstanding of cajolery by menfolk who do not act manly.⁹⁸ In another sermon dated somewhat later, Augustine tries to explain Perpetua's conduct toward her father, proposing that her disobedience was excused because it was the devil who spoke through her father, "with beguiling words, hoping that a religious spirit which would not be softened by the promptings of pleasure, might be broken by the attack of family duty and feelings."⁹⁹ In other words, Augustine maintains it was the devil whom Perpetua was resisting, not her father. Thus,

⁹⁷Salisbury, 172, 174.

⁹⁸ Augustine, "Sermons," in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, vol. 11, trans. and notes Edmund Hill, (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), 142.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 8, 79.

he reconciles Perpetua's rebelliousness against proper family behavior by arguing that since the devil had captured her father, it was socially acceptable for Perpetua to oppose him.

On the topic of Perpetua's triumphs, Augustine wants to minimize the fact that Perpetua was a woman by positing that in her dream victories, "the sex of the flesh is concealed by the virtue of the mind" and so in her achievements it is not Perpetua the woman who triumphs but "him in whom they believed."¹⁰⁰ Augustine, as Heffernan notes, "seeks to redirect his listeners' zeal from their worship of the martyrs as *dramatis personae* toward a greater theological understanding of their actions."¹⁰¹ The shift is away from Perpetua as an independent, female rebel with an active imagination and toward a Perpetua who personifies for Augustine correct social and theological attitudes. It is also worth observing that Augustine at this point does not distinguish between Perpetua's dream life and her waking life. He praises Perpetua's trampling of the dragon and climbing of the ladder, both dream images, with as much conviction as he celebrates her real martyrdom in the arena. The conclusion we are led to draw is that Augustine believes dreams to be as important (and possibly as real) as occurrences in waking life. This is confirmed in another sermon in which Augustine treats the real-life handing over of Perpetua's infant son and her dragon-ladder-shepherd dream with equal attention and concern.¹⁰² He does not see anything unusual in Perpetua's decision to give up her child because while the two may be spatially separated from each other in this world, neither mother nor child is separated from the love of Christ. In this manner, he

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹⁰¹ Heffernan, "Philology," 316.

¹⁰² Augustine, "Sermons," vol.10, 429-30.

is able to justify Perpetua's seemingly harsh abandonment of her son; there is no real abandonment in Augustine's eyes because both mother and child are together in the love of Christ. Augustine sees Perpetua's dreams as showing the Lord's promises to the faithful, implying that promises made in dreams are as valid as promises made in conscious life. In both cases the individuality of Perpetua as a specific woman, a specific case, is subordinated to the broader theological constructs of Augustine. As Heffernan underscores, "the heroism of Perpetua is only possible because she, as a believer, is one with Christ, in whom there is neither male or female. [Augustine's] intent is to moderate the idea of independent agency in the actions of the martyrs and privilege the active role of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰³

Augustine wants to honor the memory and deeds, both real and oneiric, of Perpetua (and Felicity) but he does not want to place women--martyrs or otherwise--on a par with men. Thus in his interpretation of the *Passio* in another sermon, he reminds his listeners that "there were men too who were martyrs" and that women should not be ranked higher than men; rather, "it was a greater miracle for women in their weakness to overcome the ancient enemy."¹⁰⁴ Sara Maitland comments that in Augustine's view of women, "The more heroic you were, the more it 'proved' the superiority of men."¹⁰⁵

Ancient dream interpreters, both pagan and Christian, endeavored to understand dreams--Perpetua's and the dreams of others--and make them an integral part of their overall philosophies or theologies. Each saw the

¹⁰³ Heffernan, "Philology," 316.

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, "Sermons," vol. 8, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Sara Maitland, "Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience," in *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Linda Hurcombe (New York and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 131.

meaningfulness (or, in the case of Aristotle, meaninglessness) of dreams as a confirmation of his beliefs about human nature, society and God. Each applied the dream experience to a real life situation which existed in the present and from which a meaning or a lesson could be extracted. As we will see in the following chapter, modern interpreters have done the same. And some have gone even further.

CHAPTER THREE

MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF PERPETUA AND HER DREAMS

Contemporary scholars have been just as fascinated with the meaning and use of religious dreams as were those ancient commentators just reviewed. And modern interpreters have found considerable material in Perpetua's dreams to analyze and to reflect upon. In this chapter we will consider (i) how modern scholars have approached Perpetua's dreams, (ii) what techniques they have employed in their analyses, and (iii) what their conclusions tell us about Perpetua and about themselves. I have classified examples of modern interpretations into nine categories and have provided, in Chapter Four, a tenth of my own. Some scholars, of course, have employed more than one interpretive approach, but the categories--even if somewhat artificial--do serve a valid organizational purpose and provide a useful platform for investigation and debate. The categories I will evaluate are: Classical and Comparative; Theological, Patristic and Church Historical; Feminist; Freudian and Jungian; Post-Colonialist; Neurophysiological; Fictional; Popular; and the "Real" Perpetua in Her Historical Setting.

Classical and Comparative

In this section we will examine the interpretations of scholars of classical literature and the Greco-Roman world. For the most part, these writers have

chosen not to deal with the question of whether or not dreams are a natural process or come from the deity. Rather, they have tried to show that Perpetua's dreams reflect the secular culture with which she was familiar. They are comparative in approach and find evidence of classical literary influences on the form and content of Perpetua's writings, tracing the origins of her dream symbols to texts which she might have read. They also propose that a knowledge of the attitudes of the pagan Roman majority in the Carthage of the third century is critical to an understanding of why Perpetua was imprisoned, why she dreamed as she did, and why she was executed.

Brent Shaw, for one, has found that Perpetua's dreams reflect "the 'popular literature' of the period...to which a literate woman like Perpetua would have had access."¹⁰⁶ Behind his argument is the surmise that the symbols in Perpetua's dreams come not from an external source or from her imagination, but from what she read and from the culture around her. But how much popular or classical literature would Perpetua have read by age twenty-two? Would her Christian orientation have led her toward or away from the major authors of the pagan canon? One would like to know more about early Christian reading habits and the availability of books to families like Perpetua's in Carthage of the second and third centuries before accepting Shaw's contention. Mary Ann Rossi, relying on the work of Jacques Fontaine, observes that "the calm and simple tone of [Perpetua's] writing recalls Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* and Plato's Myth of Er at the end of the *Republic*."¹⁰⁷ Another literary-antecedent example is Shaw's discovery of similarities between certain episodes from *Leucippe and*

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, 9.

¹⁰⁷ Mary Ann Rossi, "The Passion of Perpetua, Everywoman of Late Antiquity," *Pagan and Christian Anxiety: A Response to E. R. Dodds*, ed. Robert C. Smith and John Lounibos (Lanham, MD and London: University Press of America, Inc., 1984), 56.

Clitophon and Perpetua's vision of resistance to the Egyptian in the arena in her fourth dream.¹⁰⁸ Does this imply that Perpetua borrowed either intentionally or unconsciously some of the themes of her dream composition from the novels and philosophy which she had read? Or does it imply that she may have dozed off while reading and absorbed the material at hand into her actual dreams? Such hypotheses may at first appear implausible and even absurd, but that is where the literary-antecedent approach takes us. The idea that an educated young woman might have been influenced by the literature of her time may be sound, but evidence for it is lacking.

It is challenging enough for today's literary specialists to link the writings of a modern author to his or her literary ancestors; how much more challenging to search out with any degree of certainty the influences on Perpetua. Yet the attempts have been made. Robeck, following F. J. Doelger, points out that early Christians "had difficulty in separating their Christian teachings from the deeply rooted perceptions of the pagan folk literature."¹⁰⁹ E. R. Dodds, who expresses reservations about the true authorship of the *Passio* before concluding that the prison diary is authentic, also sees many classical references. He finds parallels in the dream accounts, particularly in the ladder symbol, to "Aristides' dreams, as well as [to] Mithraism" and concludes that "pagan imagery is entirely natural in the dreams of a quite recent convert."¹¹⁰

Peter Dronke, like Rossi, finds Virgilian sources for Perpetua's visions. He proposes that the linkage of dragon (or serpent), weapons and bronze ladder in her first dream "was inspired at least in part by Perpetua's reading of

¹⁰⁸ Shaw, 9.

¹⁰⁹ Robeck, 49.

¹¹⁰ E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 52.

the *Aeneid*” where the same “configuration of images” occurs.¹¹¹ Similarly, in the fourth dream, he notes “some reminiscences of Virgil’s imagery for Pyrrhus” in the description of the “fearsome armed Egyptian.”¹¹² A skeptical critic of this kind of scholarship might wonder if Perpetua read the *Aeneid* at the same time she was reading *Leucippe and Clitophon*. We must ask whether it is probable that she read her Virgil so carefully and thoroughly that she could approximate his descriptions in her dream diary. Or is it that the *Aeneid* so deeply impressed itself in her mind that its language merged with hers in her dream world? We will never know with certainty what classical literature Perpetua read and mastered, but it seems somewhat of a stretch to interpret the *Aeneid* as a source for her dream characters. Rather, one is left with the impression that it is the specialist--Rossi, Shaw or Dronke--not Perpetua, who is influenced by the classics. We are witnessing comparative literature scholars at work. The arguments illuminate their own scholarly interests rather than Perpetua’s dreams and their interpretations are really no more than claims that they have noticed similar words and images in different writings. There is no conclusive or even compelling evidence that one literary work borrowed from the other.

Once one begins to see traces of earlier authors in Perpetua’s story there is really no end to how far one might go. For example, why couldn’t Perpetua have read *Antigone* as well as the previously cited works? After all, as Mary Lefkowitz has noted in a review of the Sophocles play, it is “a drama about a young woman...who refuses to stay inside the house and do what is expected of her. She is prepared to do what is right rather than what is convenient or

¹¹¹ Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

safe.”¹¹³ Does this not describe Perpetua? Was she led to her dreams and to her actions by Greek drama? It is doubtful.

Some scholars with classical interests have avoided the pitfalls of searching for classical literary influences on the *Passio* and concentrate instead on the Roman and North African figures whose lives intersect with Perpetua's. In these cases the analysis is not directed at the dreams themselves but at the outside circumstances which led Perpetua to imprisonment and martyrdom. Andrzej Wypustek presents an argument which focuses on Septimius Severus, who ruled the Roman Empire at the turn of the second century. Wypustek, reviewing the legislation of the time, finds that Septimius Severus was particularly harsh in dealing with “magicians, astrologers and prophetic dreams.”¹¹⁴ Christian behavior that involved reliance on dreams and dream interpretation might well have been considered “potentially dangerous magic” by the Severan administration, just as extended Christian prayer was deemed to be a form of magical incantation and damaging both to the individual and to the state.¹¹⁵ The Roman distaste for and fear of magic was justification enough for the punishment of Christians. The argument is that Christians were persecuted not so much for their theology but because they were thought to practice dangerous and illegal magic. When Perpetua, in her first dream, approaches the dragon and utters the words “in nomine Iesu Christi” (*Pass.* 4: 6), it is possible that the phrase would have been interpreted by a pagan as a magical incantation. Wypustek explains that “In Pagan opinion Christians seemed to use the name of Christ or other Christian signs and symbols, e.g.

¹¹³ Mary R. Lefkowitz, “The Price of Honor,” *A. R. T. News* 22 (November 2000): 2.

¹¹⁴ Andrzej Wypustek, “Magic, Montanism, Perpetua, and the Severan Persecution,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 51 (1997): 276.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

relics, for magical purposes like exorcisms, healing, divination and magical protection.”¹¹⁶ The thrust of Wypustek’s thesis is that (i) Perpetua’s dreams suggested she was using magic, (ii) magic was inimical to the Romans, (iii) therefore Perpetua was punished severely because of her dreams. This is an interesting approach but Wypustek does not explain how the Roman officials discovered the details of Perpetua’s dreams. We know that she recounted them to her Christian companions, but would they have repeated these potentially incriminating dream elements to their jailers or judges? Further, Perpetua was already in prison and at least on the path to sentencing when she had her dreams, making the argument that the dreams were responsible for her death sentence somewhat labored.

An additional idea put forth by Wypustek is worth considering. He reasons that Perpetua’s conduct toward her father was so unusual that “One is inclined to assume that in his view Perpetua would be acting as a person hypnotized by magical incantations.”¹¹⁷ That is, if no “normal” young woman would have acted toward her father as Perpetua did, then Perpetua must have been under a spell. If we extend this thought to its ultimate conclusion, the result is a Perpetua who may not have been a voluntary Christian convert at all but a young pagan woman who had been hypnotized or entranced by the mind control techniques of a Christian cult. If we read Perpetua’s dreams in this sort of pagan context, they become verification of Christian magic at work.

Like Wypustek, James Rives is interested in exploring why Perpetua was treated as harshly as she was. He reminds us that “most scholars have abandoned the idea that there was at this time a general persecution [of

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 282.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 284.

Christians] resulting from an imperial edict.”¹¹⁸ He proposes that if there were no empire-wide policy toward Christians, it was probable that local administrators, such as the procurator Hilarianus, were the decision makers regarding the toleration or prohibition of religions. The procurator “exercised considerable discretion not only in fixing penalties but also in recognizing charges” against Christians.¹¹⁹ Therefore, it was not at all inevitable that Perpetua be executed, or for that matter punished at all. Rives notes that she was a Roman citizen and “in all likelihood a member of the decurial class.”¹²⁰ Her citizenship and status would normally be counted as points in her favor. Her father’s position and the fact that she was a young mother who had just given birth would also have been to her advantage when she was arrested and later appeared to face charges. Why was she then punished so harshly? Rives concludes that “Hilarianus’ treatment of Perpetua was more severe than it needed to have been, and it is difficult not to think that this severity was to some extent the result of his personal convictions.”¹²¹ Rives speculates that it was Hilarianus’ own religious beliefs that motivated him and that his sharply conservative views pushed him toward condemning Perpetua to death in the amphitheater.

What were the views that Hilarianus espoused? Rives believes that they included the certitude that there were acceptable and unacceptable deities. Hilarianus’ attitude toward religion ran counter to the inclusivist position of most Roman officials. In Perpetua’s case, Hilarianus was not acting “simply as a

¹¹⁸ James Rives, “The Piety of a Persecutor,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (Spring 1996): 19.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

functionary of the imperial government, but as a man intellectually and perhaps emotionally involved with the issues at hand.”¹²² Rives admits his arguments are uncertain. His conclusions regarding Hilarianus’ religious beliefs are based on identifying the Hilarianus of the Perpetua story with a P. Aelius Hilarianus who was a procurator in Spain and for whom we have altar inscriptions suggesting exclusivist beliefs. Probing these inscriptions is a job for specialists and it is not the purpose of this thesis to accept or reject Rives’ identification of the Carthage Hilarianus with the Spanish procurator. However, it is instructive to see how one can interpret the story as being not so much about Perpetua as about Hilarianus. Perhaps it is the ultimate interpretation or non-interpretation of Perpetua’s dreams in that it declares them to be not particularly relevant. What counts for Rives is not Perpetua herself but how Perpetua’s execution reveals something about pagan Roman religious differences. Where might such an approach lead? If someone other than Hilarianus had been procurator in Carthage in 203, someone with broader, more liberal religious tendencies, we might not have had an imprisoned Perpetua, we might not have had any dreams, and we might not have had our story.

Theological, Patristic and Church Historical

According to modern interpreters in the fields of Christian theology, patristics and church history, Perpetua’s dreams have their roots neither in pagan culture nor in classical literature. The dreams, in Salisbury’s view, were “about salvation...about fear and about the strength of the community.”¹²³ Interpreters such as Salisbury see Christian dream symbols where Artemidorus

¹²² Ibid., 17.

¹²³ Salisbury, 100.

saw images from the Greco-Roman world. If we review examples similar to those discussed in the section on Artemidorus from the standpoint of one intent on finding Christian symbols, we discover quite different meanings. The *ladder* represents the transition from earthly to heavenly life recalling, as Salisbury notes, the Genesis account of Jacob's ladder.¹²⁴ Robeck adds that "the ladder could also be described as a symbol of the Christian life itself."¹²⁵ He further hypothesizes that there could be a parallel between the narrowness of the ladder and the "narrow gate of which Jesus spoke."¹²⁶ The *weapons*, again borrowing from Salisbury, are made of harder metal than the ladder and thus indicate Perpetua's fear that even as a martyr she might not experience salvation. Or, as Robeck feels, the weapons may be symbols of the difficulties of and challenges to leading a Christian life.¹²⁷ The *dragon or serpent* may stand for the devil and is another reference to Genesis (at 3:15, where God puts enmity between the serpent and woman) and also to Rev. 20:2. Another possibility is that the serpent represents the Antichrist. The *garden* may be a reference to heaven as depicted in the *Apocalypse of St. Peter*.¹²⁸ The *shepherd* is thought by some interpreters to represent Christ, the Good Shepherd (see John 10:11, 14). Salisbury comments that the shepherd is also a "welcoming guide to the dreamer [as] in the *Shepherd of Hermas*."¹²⁹ The *white clothes* may refer to a vision in Revelation¹³⁰ as well as to a scene from Daniel 7:9-10.¹³¹ The *milk* (in some translations, cheese) stands for the

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Robeck, 27.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹²⁸ Salisbury, 102.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 103.

¹³¹ Robeck, 30.

Eucharist as, according to Salisbury, "Carthaginian Christians ate milk and cheese along with the bread and wine of Holy Communion."¹³² Robeck notes that references to both milk and cheese occur throughout the Hebrew Bible and that milk, when combined with honey, could refer to the Promised Land.¹³³ So, applying these symbols quite faithfully as we did with Artemidorus, we have a Perpetua who, having survived the challenges of the Christian life, overcomes the devil and is destined for heaven and a meeting with Christ in the Promised Land.

Read critically, this somewhat simplistic view assumes that almost every dream image must have a Christian symbolic equivalent. There is little room for nuance; *a* stands for *b*, *c* stands for *d* and so forth. The reader is asked to engage the text as one would decode a message written in cipher; all that is needed is the code book. Such an interpretation does have the merit of avoiding "elaborate theological doctrines" and not imposing upon a twenty-two year old convert "a high level of theological sophistication."¹³⁴ However, it is an interpretation that seems to deny Perpetua any originality and turns the artistry of her dream into a cookie cutter assemblage of symbols. It forces Perpetua into a mold and does not permit her to express herself. It superimposes the orthodoxy of Christian symbols on what is an extremely unorthodox vision. There is a presumption that nothing in the dream can stand on its own, that there is no plain sense in the text, that everything has a secondary, symbolic meaning replete with Christian overtones and references.

One may argue that an interpretation based on the unraveling of

¹³² Ibid., 103.

¹³³ Robeck, 37.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 55.

Christian symbols assumes that Perpetua was familiar enough with several books of the Bible and apocrypha to incorporate symbols from them into a dream. This may be a defensible assumption as she is depicted as an intelligent and highly motivated young woman, in close contact with the local Christian community. And she need not have read the texts in which the symbols had their source; she could have heard about them from the community and she could have observed their use in liturgy. But one does wonder whether any catechumen, even a “quick study” in her early twenties, would have had time for such an exposure. The conversations between Perpetua and her father, who is still trying to persuade her to say she is not a Christian, may be read as implying that she had not been a Christian for very long. A further critique of the Christian interpretation is that it seems to require every image in a dream to have an unvarying symbolic equivalent. Artemidorus resisted the temptation of assigning a dream symbol a single, permanent meaning, stressing “the necessity...of knowing the dreamer’s identity, occupation, birth, financial status, state of health, and age.”¹³⁵ Interpreters who focus on Christian symbolism appear to suggest that a serpent is always the devil and a ladder is always the pathway to heaven. We can surmise that whoever controls the definition of the symbols controls the text.

Rebecca Lyman is more circumspect in her analysis of Christian symbols in Perpetua’s dreams.¹³⁶ She notes that in the first dream, in which Perpetua climbs a ladder and meets a shepherd figure, it is not a symbol that protects Perpetua as she deals with the “swords, spears, hooks, daggers and spikes”

¹³⁵ Artemidorus, 8.

¹³⁶ Rebecca Lyman, “Perpetua: A Christian Quest For Self, *Journal of Women and Religion* 8 (Winter 1989): 26-31.

(*Pass.* 4.3) that are attached to the ladder and overcomes the serpent which lay beneath it. Rather, she gains “safety in the name of Christ Jesus” and recreates “the victory of the Second Eve” by crushing the serpent underfoot.¹³⁷ This approach holds that it is Perpetua’s real actions, calling aloud on Christ for help and physically overpowering the serpent, that win the day. The dream is read less as a catalog of symbols and more as an instructive story from which we all might learn. Similarly, Lyman does not necessarily see the grey-haired man as a symbol for God the Father as other interpreters have been wont to do.

Although the shepherd figure refers to Perpetua as “my child,” (*Pass.* 4. 9) she never refers to him as Father as she might if he were indeed a God symbol.

Lyman sees this episode as suggestive of reward and welcome. The offering of milk (or cheese) is not symbolic of either the Eucharist or baptism but is an image of comfort. Just as Perpetua the mother comforted her child by nursing it, the shepherd comforts Perpetua with a restorative gift of milk. The “Amen” that concludes this section hints that the dream may be taking place in a church setting and that Perpetua gains succor not only from the shepherd but also from a congregation of coreligionists. And is Perpetua’s calmness in the face of learning that “we would no longer have any hope in this life” (*Pass.* 4.10) a result of her confidence in the life to come?

Lyman also argues that attempts to see Christian symbolism in the dream of the fight in the arena are misplaced. She finds instead that “the detail is all too realistic to ancient games” and that Perpetua’s defeat of the Egyptian is not to be interpreted symbolically as “a defeat of paganism” but as an illustration of her own strength and insight.¹³⁸ Again we are led to an interpretation which

¹³⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 30.

teaches us from realistic example rather than from conjectural symbol.

Alvyn Pettersen offers another analysis of Perpetua's dreams, one which sees "a spirituality dependent upon the *imitatio Christi*."¹³⁹ For Pettersen, the dreams are filled with images and symbols which illustrate Perpetua's closeness to God and willing acceptance of a life which follows Christ's. He interprets the vision of Perpetua's fight with the Egyptian as an identification with Christ, suggesting that her "striking the Egyptian in the face with her heels points beyond a pancratium with an Egyptian to the Christologically interpreted text of Genesis 3.15."¹⁴⁰ Perpetua's dream proclamation that she is proceeding "in nomine Iesu Christi" (*Pass.* 4. 6) is taken to mean that she will live a Christlike life in both sleeping and waking states and that her martyr's death in the amphitheater will imitate Christ's death on the cross. The gray haired man dressed as a shepherd who welcomes Perpetua as a *teknon* (*Pass.* 4. 9) is taken to be the heavenly father who, in welcoming Perpetua with this term, acknowledges her as a disciple and "the spiritual offspring of the exemplar."¹⁴¹ The reader is thus encouraged to see Perpetua as returning to her heavenly father (as opposed to her biological father) much as Christ did, and being recognized as his offspring.

As we might expect, Pettersen finds Perpetua's visionary trials and emotional tribulations as, like Christ's, "means of progress and purification."¹⁴² Her stepping on the dragon's head and climbing a ladder are referents to the renunciation of the devil and to the start of her pilgrimage to God. Her rubdown

¹³⁹ Alvyn Pettersen, "Perpetua--Prisoner of Conscience," *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (June 1987): 140.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 145.

with oil before the battle with the Egyptian is a reference “to the practice of the anointing of the newly Baptized” and the kiss from her trainer after her victory serves to “recall the Eucharistic *pax*.”¹⁴³ Perpetua’s dreams in Pettersen’s view are neither nightmares nor dreams of terror. They are dreams of hope, a hope which

had realized itself in the obedient self sacrifice of the Christ, and repeatedly realized itself, both individually and corporately, in the transfiguration of mankind into the image and likeness of that same servant, obedient unto death.¹⁴⁴

Thomas J. Heffernan is also of the *imitatio Christi* school. Although his focus is more on Felicity than on Perpetua, he concludes that Perpetua’s dreams are “mimetic; they constitute an *imitatio Christi*” and that “Perpetua’s choice of words to describe her memory of the dreams must be deliberate, consonant with this intention.”¹⁴⁵ Heffernan thinks that since Perpetua asked the deity for her dreams, they should not be read as other dreams might, “the products of an associative frame, free from a discernible teleology.”¹⁴⁶ Rather, the dreams are sent by God to enable Perpetua to “locate her event within some larger absolute frame.”¹⁴⁷

What can we say about the Pettersen and Heffernan readings? Do they impute to Perpetua a sophisticated Christology which may have been beyond her intellectual grasp and which she may not have professed? Does it remove some of the spontaneity and excitement from her dream world and substitute a heavy handed premeditativeness? As a young cathecuman, how far would

¹⁴³ Ibid., 148.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 149.

¹⁴⁵ Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 203.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 204.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 205.

Perpetua have progressed toward a logically complete and philosophically resolved understanding of her faith? Perhaps Pettersen and Heffernan are reading into the text their own ideas and beliefs and smothering Perpetua's voice.

As we have seen in the sections above, there are a variety of Christian interpretations, both ancient and modern, of Perpetua's dreams. In fact, it is the importance of the dreams to Christians that is clearly responsible for the preservation and popularization of her story. Without her dreams it is possible that Perpetua would have been just another unknown and unremembered martyr. While we know that Perpetua was a determined Christian, it may be instructive to ask what kind of a Christian she was. The term "Christian" encompassed a wide range of beliefs in the early third century, just as it does today. What sort of Christianity is reflected in Perpetua's dream world? Modern scholars have been dueling for some time now over whether or not the dreams and visions in the *Passio* suggest a Montanist viewpoint and whether or not Perpetua herself might have been a member of the New Prophecy movement. We know that Montanism, which began in Phrygia in Asia Minor around 170, had spread to North Africa by the time of Perpetua's adherence to Christianity. It is not the purpose of this paper to detail the history and tenets of Montanism, but a summary provided by Frederick Klawiter may be useful to place the discussion which follows in context. Klawiter writes that the movement's

leaders were Montanus and two women, Priscilla and Maximilla. They claimed to have received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues, enthusiastically witnessed to their faith... . Central to [the Montanist] message were the hope of the imminent end of the world, the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem and the duty of Christians to confess the name publicly in the midst of persecution.

...[W]hat has been called voluntary martyrdom was an important feature of the New Prophecy.¹⁴⁸

With this background in mind, let us review some of the scholarly arguments for and against a Montanist interpretation of Perpetua's dreams.

Lisa M. Sullivan is among those who oppose a Montanist interpretation. She finds that "there is nothing specifically Montanist about the work as a whole" and reminds us that "It was not vision per se that characterized Montanism, but the immediate presence of the Paraclete in its prophets, a sort of 'possession' during which the spirit spoke directly through them."¹⁴⁹ In Sullivan's analysis, Perpetua was not possessed. Her dreams were vividly personal and in them she speaks for herself and not for the Paraclete. Perpetua's dreams reflect her own life experiences, her own dilemmas and her own family circumstances. Her dreams give no suggestion that she is a medium for another. Sullivan hints that if there is any Montanism in the *Passio*, it comes not from Perpetua but from the redactor, who "might have seen more in Perpetua's account than she herself did."¹⁵⁰ That is, Perpetua's dreams were not Montanist, but her editor might well have been.

William C. Weinrich is another who doubts that Perpetua was a Montanist. He bases his argument on the premise that Perpetua's visions, rather than reflecting Montanist ideas, were rooted in a pagan culture which spoke to the special situation of those who died violently or before their time.¹⁵¹

Robeck joins Weinrich in employing evidence outside of Perpetua's dream

¹⁴⁸ Klawiter, 251-3.

¹⁴⁹ Lisa M. Sullivan, "I responded, 'I will not...': Christianity as Catalyst for Resistance in the *Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis*," *Semeia*, 79 (1997): 65.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1981), 227.

world, such as the fact that Tertullian “never mentioned Perpetua as a member of the New Prophecy, even when it would have been appropriate and useful for him to do,” to contend that she and the other martyrs were “orthodox, Catholic Christians.”¹⁵²

Aligned against those who are suspicious of Montanist interpretations, Kenneth B. Steinhauser is unequivocal in his conviction that the *Passio* “is clearly a Montanist document” and that “Visions, exhibiting Montanist images, abound.”¹⁵³ Among the images he cites is the dream in which Perpetua is given milk (or cheese) by the shepherd (*Pass.* 4. 9). Steinhauser relates this practice to the Artotyrians, with whom the Montanists were identified. He also connects the dream in which Perpetua becomes male (*Pass.* 10. 7) with the Montanist principle that women and men could have equal authority in a Christian community. Finally, he observes that the thrust of the dream narratives is the glorification of martyrdom, a posture central to Montanism.

Timothy Barnes is just as certain as Steinhauser that “the theological character of the *Passion* is Montanist through and through.”¹⁵⁴ As justification for this view, he cites the use of scriptural passages in the *Passio* that were commonly employed by the Montanists, Perpetua’s dream of Dinocrates, and her almost cheerful willingness to die.¹⁵⁵ Andrzej Wypustek agrees that the “Pneumatic inspiration, mediumistic enhancements and prophetic trances” which were a part of Montanism were also present in Perpetua’s group of imprisoned Christians. But does the presence of an active visionary life and a

¹⁵² Robeck, 16; Weinrich, 228.

¹⁵³ Kenneth B. Steinhauser, “Augustine’s Reading of the *Passio sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*,” *Studia Patristica* 33 (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1997), 244.

¹⁵⁴ Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 77.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, and 78.

belief in dreams necessarily equate with the presence of Montanism? Certainly we have seen that dreaming and the belief in the importance of dreams were as prevalent in the pre-Christian world and in normative Christianity as they were in Montanism. The sole fact that Perpetua lived in an environment which valued visions does not seem conclusive enough to make her a Montanist. But Wypustek is not alone in his insistence that the dreams are circumstantial evidence of Montanism.

Klawiter is another scholar who is convinced that Perpetua's dreams indicate her adherence to Montanist doctrine. His reading of the *Passio* leads him to conclude that "Without a doubt the document was authored by a member of the New Prophecy, and Perpetua and Saturus stand forth as noble martyrs in that movement."¹⁵⁶ He buttresses his case with examples from Perpetua's dreams. In the first dream, after Perpetua describes the ladder, she reports that "Saturus was the first to go up, he who was later to give himself up of his own accord." (*Pass.* 4. 5) Klawiter interprets Saturus's willing surrender as demonstrating that he was a voluntary martyr and implies that as such he must have been a Montanist. The unstated logical extension of this line of thought is that since Saturus was a Montanist, Perpetua must have been one too. But did Montanists have a monopoly on voluntary martyrdom? And is that term an accurate description of Saturus's behavior? The text says only that Saturus gave himself up, not that he actively sought martyrdom. One can imagine other possibilities for his actions, including the notion that he might receive a lighter punishment (since a death sentence, as has been noted above, was not automatic and in fact was unusually harsh), the possibility that he was already

¹⁵⁶ Klawiter, 257.

implicated as a member of the Christian community or a natural desire on the part of a leader to protect his coreligionists. Klawiter seems to read more into the text than is actually there. He does, however, add the meaningful observation that at the time of Perpetua's martyrdom, it is probable that the New Prophecy "had not yet been rejected by the Carthaginian catholic community."¹⁵⁷ If this is true, it is possible to say that Perpetua may have shared Montanist beliefs without formally committing herself to the movement. That is, she may have been what we today might call "Montanist" without knowing it herself and without turning her back on the normative Christian church. The Montanist labeling seems to be a result of a modern desire to place early Christian religious thinking into neat categories when, in fact, such classifications did not exist in ancient times. We must remember that Perpetua herself said "I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian" (*Pass.* 3. 2). She had, one suspects, much opportunity to say she was a follower of the New Prophecy or of Montanus; she never did.

Feminist

Perpetua's dreams have attracted comment from a number of feminist interpreters for reasons that are succinctly summarized by Daniel Hoffman:

Perpetua is often described in modern studies on women as an example of a woman who defied the traditional standards and conventions of her day by standing up to her pagan father and the repressive male authorities; as one who symbolically transcended the expectations placed on the female sex by becoming a man (in one of her revelations) and by exhibiting extreme bravery in contests in the arena; as one who exercised leadership among Christians through her prophetic ability and charisma; and as one

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

who actually left her own record for women to lead and follow.¹⁵⁸

Elizabeth Petroff is concerned with the style of Perpetua's dream record, arguing that its composition is consistent with the style of other women devotional writers and "may be characterized as emotional...repetitive, proverbial, nonanalytical; the language is concrete rather than abstract, subjective, timeless, ahistorical."¹⁵⁹ Without denying the importance of Petroff's work, one must view this as a rather strong statement, containing many generalizations, and it raises several questions. First, as discussed earlier, there is some degree of consensus that at least parts of Perpetua's story (the introduction, the conclusion) were redacted, perhaps by another woman but most probably by a man. The dream sequences may also have been edited or tampered with over the years. So we must ask whose style Petroff is looking at? Would an editor--male or female--have changed Perpetua's "feminine" style or sought to maintain it? Was Perpetua taught to write like a woman or is Petroff claiming that a feminine devotional style is inborn? Salisbury states that Roman fathers, rather than tutors or mothers, were involved in the education of their well-born daughters and that Perpetua's education (and thus writing style) was "under the absolute and affectionate guidance of her father."¹⁶⁰ Would he have been capable of teaching a feminine style? Second, Petroff's list of feminine characteristics seems arbitrary and undocumented. Are only women writers emotional or timeless? Certainly one can find male devotional writers who are repetitive (in fact, one might argue that repetition is a hallmark of much devotional writing), subjective and ahistorical. Science has not yet proven

¹⁵⁸ Daniel Hoffman, *The Status of Women and Gnosticism in Irenaeus and Tertullian* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), 170.

¹⁵⁹ Petroff, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Salisbury, 7.

conclusively that gender determines literary style. Nor is it safe to say that one can accurately “sex” a text like a chicken. Third, should a dream record be categorized and analyzed as a literary document when, perhaps, it was not meant to be more than a hastily scribbled memory by a just awakened prisoner? One doubts that Perpetua would have had either the time or the inclination to worry about the niceties of composition or whether she was being “proverbial” or “ahistorical.” There is a possibility that Petroff’s own conception of what constitutes feminine style leads her to assign to Perpetua’s dream diary stylistic qualities which it really does not have. Does Petroff demean Perpetua’s narrative by terming it emotional and nonanalytical, or does she consider these to be positive qualities? Again, we learn more about the interpreter from this exercise than we do about Perpetua.

Patricia Cox Miller attempts a very different feminist interpretation. Using “interpretive strategies taken from French feminist writers,” she finds Perpetua’s dreams “as both reflective and resistant to the sexual politics of her community, a community in which there was a power struggle that was engendered in male and female terms.”¹⁶¹ Miller begins by asserting that Perpetua lived in the context of a patriarchal society, but one which was experiencing some turbulence over the role of women in the church. For example, the Montanist movement was becoming influential in North Africa at the time and gave greater prominence to women than orthodoxy sanctioned. Miller reads Perpetua’s dreams as emphasizing the triumph of women over men and as “a vision of a new empowered sense of self-identity that is ‘other’ to the constructs of the social order.”¹⁶² Dreams, especially prophetic dreams, allowed a woman to

¹⁶¹ Miller, 166.

¹⁶² Ibid., 181.

express herself critically in a manner that would be unacceptable in waking life. Miller seeks to buttress her case for Perpetua's dreams as the "imaginal empowering of a woman's voice"¹⁶³ by citing thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and claiming that the dreams reflect "carnavalesque" discourse. While it is quite possible to imagine a Perpetua who was intentionally or inadvertently involved in the sexual politics of the early church, it is more difficult to picture her weighing her dream descriptions so that they properly expressed the carnivalesque and the subversive "other". Miller and the authors she cites forget Perpetua the real person with real dreams in their eagerness to justify and confirm their theories.

David Scholer is also prepared to link Perpetua to the idea of sexual politics. He traces the trajectory of Perpetua's feminist development from her anxiety over caring for her newborn baby to her confidence that her baby is fine without her, claiming that

In some sense she has left behind the traditional limiting role of motherhood, which in that culture would never give a woman an opportunity to be an empowered leader. She now has transcended her traditional female sexual role and is now able to play the role of an empowered martyred leader in the church.¹⁶⁴

Scholer finds Perpetua's statement "and suddenly I was a man," (*Pass.* 10. 7) which we have discussed earlier, as supporting his contention that Perpetua had found a new political identity in prison, one which allowed her to rise above the subordinate position that women occupied in ancient times to become an authority to whom others looked for guidance. He reads the passage figuratively, not literally, noting that "Because of the patriarchalism and

¹⁶³ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶⁴ Scholer, 11.

androcentrism in those cultures, often when women are described as empowered persons, especially in Jewish or Christian traditions, they are described as taking on the characteristics of a man.”¹⁶⁵ He backs this conclusion with citations from IV Maccabees, *Joseph and Asenath*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* in which women assume a masculine attribute.

Is a Perpetua who sheds her female characteristics in order to become a leader a positive role model for contemporary women? Scholer raises this question and presents a summary argument for each side of the debate. He observes that some scholars, such as Sara Maitland, see Perpetua’s transformation into a man--whether literal or figurative--as a capitulation and a surrender to sexism and misogyny which make her an unsuitable hero for modern feminist women.¹⁶⁶ On the other hand, he finds other scholars (such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ross Kraemer and Virginia Burrus) who are prepared to hail Perpetua as a positive example and who find the “I was a man” phrase little more than a cultural usage, a conventional expression of the time.

Without taking sides in this debate, one wonders whether both camps have missed a major point. That is, Perpetua’s female-male transformation (if indeed it was that) occurred in a dream setting and not in the real, waking world. This distinguishes it from Scholer’s other examples of female-male motifs in Jewish and early Christian literature. Perpetua remained very much a woman in her fully conscious state. Should she be held accountable for her dream images? Can one be a politically correct feminist in the real world and still harbor politically incorrect dreams at night? Is it possible that in a world

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 12.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

permeated by gender issues we are making too much of this particular representation in Perpetua's dream life?

Kate Cooper reminds us of another aspect of Perpetua's sexual transformation, the fact that it may be viewed as pornographic and titillating. She observes that the Perpetua text assumes a male readership and that "a woman, reading such texts, would be drawn into imagining herself as a *male* reader in order to accept the proposed objectification of women and/or the erasure of their femininity."¹⁶⁷ Certainly, the amphitheater dream scene (*Pass.* 10:1-15) has elements which, at least through modern eyes, border on the sexually explicit. The Egyptian is "vicious," Perpetua's seconds and assistants are "handsome young men," her clothes are "stripped off," she is rubbed down with oil. Cooper hints that the author of the *Passio* was aware of the literary impact of this sort of writing and endeavored to "offer a niche where the reader can find his or her own implied presence as a partaker in the spectacle."¹⁶⁸ How common were dreams such as this one of Perpetua's in ancient times? How frequently were dreams with possible sexual content used to make political statements? Perhaps we should turn back to Artemidorus for help.

Gillian Cloke examines the feminist aspects of Perpetua's story from another standpoint, that of family values. She notes that Christianity "had a pronounced effect of setting its adherents--and particularly women--against traditional Roman concepts of...*pietas*: of conscious devotion to the 'family as entity'."¹⁶⁹ Perpetua's behavior, in both everyday and visionary states, evinced a rejection of her role as a proper Roman woman. She could be seen as

¹⁶⁷ Cooper, 155-6.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 155.

¹⁶⁹ Gillian Cloke, "Mater or Martyr: Christianity and the Alienation of Women Within the Family in the Later Roman Empire," *Theology and Sexuality* 5 (September 1996): 37.

disobeying her father, abandoning her child, ignoring the very existence of her husband, if indeed she had one. Cloke astutely observes that “anti-familial feeling is not an accusation hurled at the male martyrs and confessors,” but was often serious consideration for women martyrs.¹⁷⁰ Women’s additional family burden made it all the more striking when they rose above it, as did Perpetua. As Cloke puts it, “the more violent the struggle with the forces of convention, the greater was the victory.”¹⁷¹ Perpetua’s triumphs in her dreams pointed the way for other women to follow.

Freudian and Jungian

In his classic work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud writes that “All material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience.”¹⁷² An understanding of this experiential material, however, is not an easy task and, for Freudians, requires professional assistance. The discovery of what experiences are referenced and why is made difficult because, according to Freud, the manifest or surface content of the dream shields its latent or real content. To find the true meaning of a dream requires an extended analysis in which both psychoanalyst and analysand participate. Together they probe the secret or unconscious meaning of the dream and the wish fulfillment and repressed sexual impulses which it disguises.

Freud’s disciples expanded his work on dreams to the point where psychoanalysis became an all encompassing doctrine which could be seen, in

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 44.

Clayton Crockett's words, "as a reductive theory that subsumes all others."¹⁷³ For orthodox Freudians, Crockett continues, "religious feeling is an illusion that becomes a collective delusion when humans objectify and worship the source of this feeling."¹⁷⁴ It is not surprising, then, that Freudian interpretations of Perpetua's dreams conclude that they are neither communications from a deity nor a means of predicting the future. Freudian interpreters of Perpetua's dreams begin with the conviction that "dreams feed not on prophecy but on remembrance" and that "the semiological vector points not to the future but to the past."¹⁷⁵ Most of the interpretations we have considered thus far look at Perpetua's dreams as forecasts, as explanations of what is to come, or as messages from God. For the Freudian psychoanalyst, dreams are not revelatory of God's will but intimations of a hidden, authentic personal history. While this would seem to place Christian and Freudian interpreters at opposite poles, both rely heavily on solving the puzzle of a dream's symbolic meanings. Christians and Freudians alike strive to uncover the dream's secrets by unraveling its symbolic associations. Each, however, employs a different cryptographic methodology.

Robert Rousselle is a practitioner of what is perhaps an extreme version of the Freudian approach. He treats Perpetua's dreams as if they were the dreams of a patient undergoing therapy and concludes that "a psychoanalysis of her dreams shows Perpetua to be a deeply troubled, neurotic young woman."¹⁷⁶ Rousselle finds recurring elements in Perpetua's dreams which

¹⁷³ Clayton Crockett, "On Sublimation: The Significance of Psychoanalysis for the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (December 2000): 839.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ George Steiner, "The Historicity of Dreams," *Salmagundi* 61 (Fall 1983): 12.

¹⁷⁶ Robert Rousselle, "The Dreams of Vibia Perpetua: 'Analysis of a Female Christian Martyr'," *The Journal of Psychohistory* 14 (Winter 1987): 204.

point to either actual or unconscious rape and incest; or at least what Lefkowitz refers to as “a close emotional pairing of father and daughter.”¹⁷⁷ Let us examine a few of Rousselle’s interpretations. The serpent at the foot of the ladder and the weapons on it in dream one stand for the phallus. Climbing the ladder with its “rhythmic movements and increasing breathlessness” parallels coitus.¹⁷⁸ The gray haired shepherd who offers Perpetua cheese is none other than Perpetua’s father offering her his semen. Finally, the transformation of Perpetua from woman to man in dream four is explained as “rape by a divine father-figure [which] leads to the fantasy that the woman has been compensated by receiving a phallus and becoming a man and, in fact, is placed in a position of near equality to the father figure.”¹⁷⁹ In the Freudian world, Perpetua’s dreams are disguised pictures of her intercourse with her father. Perpetua’s rejection of her father and her readiness to be martyred can now be seen as logically proceeding from her guilt. “In patriarchal society,” Lefkowitz tells us, “the guilt for an incestuous relationship is (remarkably) felt only by the younger, passive partner.”¹⁸⁰

We have come quite a distance, it seems, from the symbolic readings of Artemidorus and the Christian dream analysts. But to the skeptical reader the interpretive burden on the analyst remains the same: Where is the evidence that would lend support to any of Rousselle’s claims? Perpetua was never his analysand. She herself never related her dreams to him, nor did she engage in the self examination that is vital to successful Freudian psychotherapy. Freud sought to be accepted as a scientist, one whose conclusions were based on

¹⁷⁷ Lefkowitz, “Motivations,” 420.

¹⁷⁸ Rousselle, 195.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 202.

¹⁸⁰ Lefkowitz, “Motivations,” 420.

experimentation and real life experiences with his patients. Psychohistory of the sort Rousselle embraces lacks this discipline and interaction. Here we have Rousselle telling us what Perpetua's dreams meant; in standard psychoanalysis it is the patient who makes this discovery. Freud believed that certain symbols were universal, but how can we be sure that the symbols of third century Carthage have the same valence as those of turn-of-the-century Vienna? To say that a serpent is a phallus does not make it one. As Freud himself reportedly commented, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. What we have once more is the seemingly irresistible desire to apply a limited theory to a situation for which it was never meant.

C. G. Jung accepted Freud's observations regarding the importance of dream interpretation to psychotherapy, maintaining that the dream "is an autonomous and meaningful product of psychic activity, susceptible like all other psychic functions, of a systematic analysis."¹⁸¹ However he developed his own approach to exploring a dream's meaning. Jung held that dream symbols were not unconscious distortions of sexual impulses as Freud believed, but metaphors for universal forms or archetypes: Dreams were illustrations of the collective unconscious. Jung gave names to these forms--the shadow, the animus, the anima--but warned that all dream symbols must be read in context and that the recognition of the meaning of a dream symbol "is a specific experience that seems to be reserved mostly, or at any rate primarily, for psychotherapists."¹⁸² In other words, dream interpretation was to be reserved to an elite which had its own special language and rules and held the power to

¹⁸¹ C.G. Jung, *Dreams*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 3.

¹⁸² C.G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, Bolligen Series 20, vol 9, pt. 2, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), 267.

give proper meaning to the dream. Jung also believed that dreams compensated for waking attitudes. That is, dream images of oneself and one's attitudes were often reversals, the opposite of the waking self's conduct. As James A. Hall explains, "If for example, one is excessively polite and subordinate in conscious relationships, a dream might compensate by showing one to be overbearing and aggressive."¹⁸³ Did Perpetua's dreams compensate for her quotidian behavior? Was the real life Perpetua the opposite of the Perpetua of the *Passio*'s dreams?

M.L. von Franz, a leading Jungian analyst, has attempted to apply Jung's principles to Perpetua's dreams. Von Franz, dealing with the four dream sequences in their entirety, sees in Perpetua's father not a rapist (as did Rousselle) but the "embodiment of the animus" who "determines her spiritual temperament."¹⁸⁴ Perpetua's becoming a man is therefore not phallic but a representation of her individuation, her maturation into a fully realized person. Von Franz finds as many Jungian symbols as Rousselle finds Freudian. The ladder represents the way to a higher consciousness, "an individual path which must ultimately be trodden without the help of another."¹⁸⁵ The dragon is an unconscious nature spirit. The shepherd is the logos, "a symbol of the ordering mind of God which pervades the universe."¹⁸⁶ And as a coup de grace, the arena in which Perpetua is martyred is a mandala, "a symbol of the Self which embraces the conscious and unconscious sides of the personality in a totality."¹⁸⁷ Was Perpetua ever conscious of the archetypal nature of her

¹⁸³ James A. Hall, *The Unconscious Christian: Images of God in Dreams* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 27.

¹⁸⁴ M.L. von Franz, "The 'Passio Perpetuae'," *Spring* (1949): 115.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

dreams? Did the arena, for example, ever appear to be a mandala to the real Perpetua? Neither she nor the narrator mention it. Would von Franz's amphitheater-as-mandala interpretation be spoiled if the arena in Carthage were not round but elliptical? Contemporary archaeological work suggests an oval shape.¹⁸⁸ Would Perpetua, so dedicated a Christian that she would die for her faith rather than sacrifice to a pagan god, agree with the all inclusive universalism and pluralistic language of Jung? One doubts it.

Yet scholars seem to find Jung, or at least von Franz, far more congenial than Freud or Rousselle. Mary Ann Rossi, for example, accepts without question the Jungian version of Perpetua's dreams.¹⁸⁹ Cecil Robeck appears to find that von Franz's work "does not seem to be too far from [the] allegorical format" of Augustine.¹⁹⁰ Do Jungian symbol interpretations seem any more plausible than Freudian ones? Or do students of religion prefer Jung to Freud because the former takes a "pro religion" stance while the latter is doggedly "anti"? The comments of Rossi and Robeck can be read as demonstrating a bias in favor of a psychology that accepts religion as an integral part of its underpinning.

Post-Colonialist

If it is possible to read Perpetua's story as a psychological case study, it may be equally conceivable to read it as making a political statement against colonial rule. Lisa Sullivan is one who finds Perpetua's dreams as expressing "North African resistance against the Roman political...order."¹⁹¹ To understand

¹⁸⁸ Salisbury, 35. Salisbury reproduces Lisa Qualm's map of Roman Carthage, showing an oval arena.

¹⁸⁹ Rossi, 57-62.

¹⁹⁰ Robeck, 53.

¹⁹¹ Sullivan, 63.

her claim, a brief summary of Carthage's Roman history may be helpful. Perpetua's Carthage was the result of a Roman colonization, beginning about 40 BCE, of a largely uninhabited area which, in turn, followed the complete destruction of the original Carthage at the end of the Punic war. W. H. C. Frend writes that as cities developed, the differences between the native Berbers and the Roman colonizers faded, although they never disappeared.¹⁹² J. B. Rives notes that while the Italian rulers first followed a lifestyle modeled after Roman practice, "over the course of the second century CE it apparently became prestigious for the elite, no matter what their background, to claim African origin."¹⁹³ There was an influx of native Africans, Punic was spoken, and even those of Italian stock gave African names to their children.¹⁹⁴ Thus, Perpetua would have been a product not only of Rome, but also of the particularly African environment that surrounded her.

Sullivan begins her argument by proposing that "Among possible factors in the overwhelming acceptance of Christianity by the inhabitants of North Africa was an element of social protest in the rejection of an official Roman religion, seen by non-Romanized North Africans as representative of an oppressive political system."¹⁹⁵ What was this "oppressive political system"? Rome pressured its North African colonies to expand the production of olive oil and other crops in order to supply many of the colonizers' agricultural needs. As production increased, so did taxes and levies which served to exploit the

¹⁹² For a thorough discussion of Roman and Berber elements in Carthage and North Africa, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; reissued 1985), 32-47.

¹⁹³ J.B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustine to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 162.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Sullivan, 67.

Carthaginians even further. Sullivan, following the work of Barbara Harlow, finds the *Passio* to be a kind of “resistance literature” in which the manipulation of the narrative’s plot, character and setting subsequently reflect both the social structure of resistance movements themselves and the collective and popular needs to which they respond.¹⁹⁶ She cites Perpetua’s dream of the contest with the Egyptian in the arena as evidence that the colonials were “defeating the Roman government at its own game.”¹⁹⁷ The battle images in the dream can be read as “a clear case of the subjugated using the terms of the dominant to speak back to and resist dominance.”¹⁹⁸

How compelling is Sullivan’s argument? On the surface, it is somewhat parallel to Frend’s examination of Donatism “as a native nationalist movement with a soteriological background.”¹⁹⁹ But Frend’s conclusions are supported by far more facts than Sullivan’s. First, there is no evidence in Perpetua’s text that she thought of herself specifically as being an African as opposed to being a Roman. She defines herself as a woman, daughter, mother, friend, Christian, but never as a Berber, African, or colonial. Second, the dream narratives and the text which surrounds them offer ample opportunity for Perpetua to make a direct political statement, yet she does not. In other instances when she wanted to speak out--whether about Christianity, her father, her companions--she clearly did so; she was not bashful about expressing herself straightaway. Her silence on the subject of colonialism suggests it was not one of her particular interests. Third, viewing the Rome-Carthage relationship of 203 in terms of modern sociopolitical theory may play somewhat fast and loose with history.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹⁹⁹ Frend, xviii.

Economic and political colonialism as we know it today was alien to the third century. Finally, calling the *Passio* “resistance literature” must logically assume that there was an active anti-colonial political resistance movement of some sort on the part of the Carthaginians. Again, one searches the Perpetua text and related literature for signs of such a movement. Sullivan may have embraced a fashionable idea and attached it to a situation in which it has no real place.

Neurophysiology

As we have seen, most scholars in disciplines such as religion, the humanities and analytic psychology accept Perpetua’s dreams as having some meaning, though they may disagree with vehemence over what that meaning is. J. Allan Hobson, a representative of the neurophysiological school of dream studies, would question whether there is any meaning at all in Perpetua’s or anyone else’s dreams. Hobson explains that in dream states there is a potent change in the chemistry of the brain, so that “memory, attention, orientation, self-reflective awareness, insight and judgment are all impaired.”²⁰⁰ Experiments show that chemicals thought to be crucial to memory, such as norepinephrine and serotonin, are significantly reduced during dreaming; this leads Hobson to conclude that dream events “are all, in essence, unwilled natural phenomena.”²⁰¹ In this regard, Hobson is in agreement with Aristotle; both believe that dreams are a bodily function that is neither predictive of the future nor explanatory of the past. Relying on measurements of rapid eye movements (REM) during sleep, Hobson and other physiologists have proposed an “activation-synthesis” hypothesis of dreaming which finds that “the sensorimotor

²⁰⁰ J. Allan Hobson, *Consciousness* (New York: Scientific American Library, 1999), 55.

²⁰¹ J. Allan Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 11.

hallucinosis of the dream experience is the direct and necessary concomitant of the specific activation of sensorimotor brain circuits."²⁰² In perhaps less technical language, dreams appear to us to be unusual because

the brain-mind knows what state it is in only from its context. Since most organized precepts derive from the waking state, the REM-sleep-activated brain-mind assumes it is awake despite the distinctly different organization of experience. In REM sleep, the brain has no choice but to interpret its internally generated signals in terms of its previous experience with the outside world. According to activation synthesis, the change in mode of information processing caused by an arrest in aminergic neuronal firing contributes to this loss of self-reference.²⁰³

Does this suggest that dreams are mere bodily mechanics? Hobson's answer is no. His conclusion is that because certain cells of the brain stem rest during REM sleep, others are "caused to fire in such a manner as to provide a program for the active maintenance of many brain circuits."²⁰⁴ Thus, dreaming becomes a means of replenishment that helps both the learning and creative processes. In a flight of fancy that is welcome though quite surprising in a technical work, Hobson writes that "Each of us is a surrealist at night during his or her dreams; each is a Picasso, a Dali, a Fellini--the delightful and macabre mixed in full measure."²⁰⁵ Perpetua's dreams, in a neurophysiologist's view, allowed her troubled mind to rest and provided a canvass for her creativity and imagination.

Fiction

²⁰² Ibid., 210.

²⁰³ Ibid., 212.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 298.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 296-7.

It is no wonder that writers of fiction have been drawn to the Perpetua narrative. It contains all those elements which make for a gripping, lively and inspirational story. There is a well-born young woman with ideas of her own, a traditionalist father, a band of committed Christians, a devoted servant, two infants, representatives of Roman authority and a climactic scene with gladiators, wild animals, and blood in the Carthage arena. Because the *Passio* is relatively brief and leaves much unsaid about Perpetua's life, creative writers have filled in the missing details with verve and imagination. Those writers who have based plays, novels and libretti on Perpetua cannot help infusing their work with the same sort of interpretive reflection and conjecture that we have observed in the scholarly literature. While they allow themselves far greater liberties with the text than do most scholars, and are somewhat more inventive, writers of fiction are also interpreters. Tracy's endorsement of a genuine pluralism of readings of a classic can be extended successfully to fiction.²⁰⁶ The search for meaning and truth is as present in fiction as it is in factual writing. Let us consider a few examples.

In 1747, Lorenzo di Brunassi, Duke of San Filippo, published a libretto based on the *Passio*.²⁰⁷ Brunassi's work, set to music by Giacomo Sellitto, was performed in Naples between 1745 and 1747. The opera is notable for its invention of a husband for Perpetua. He is Adrasto, a Roman patrician and army captain, and is faithful to his young wife throughout her ordeal. In the final act he becomes a Christian himself, singing "se Cristian gia sono."²⁰⁸ Other imaginative additions to the original Perpetua text include a pagan priest and

²⁰⁶ See Chapter One.

²⁰⁷ Lorenzo di Brunassi, *S. Perpetua martire: tragedia* (Naples: Presso Giovanni di Simone, 1747).

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

choruses of magistrates, Christians and pagans who echo the sentiments of the leading characters. Felicity is notably absent from the opera. Brunassi fills in the gaps of the *Passio* so that Eighteenth century family values are maintained. For Perpetua to be a heroine, she must have a husband; and for her husband to be acceptable, he must be a Christian.

Sarah Flower Adams (1805-1848), an English Unitarian who is perhaps best known for the composition of the words to the hymn, "Nearer, My God to Thee," was also the author of *Vivia Perpetua*, a dramatic poem in five acts, published in 1841.²⁰⁹ In Adams' play, the story told in the *Passio* is helped along by the addition of new characters and the enhancement and expansion of the personalities of Perpetua, her father, Felicity and Saturus. The play begins as Barac, a negatively stereotyped Jewish merchant, discovers that Perpetua is a Christian catechumen and betrays her and her friends to the Roman procurator, Hilarianus. Hilarianus is under pressure from his superiors in Rome to do something about the local Christians and also to produce participants for a celebratory festival and games which are to take place in the amphitheater. Hilarianus is happy to arrest Perpetua because it will embarrass her father, Vivius, who is presented as some sort of political and economic rival to the Procurator. Perpetua's relationship with her father is somewhat less stormy than in the *Passio*, and it is her father who takes her son and spirits him away by sea to safety and a new life. In an inventive author's note which combines truth and fiction, Adams tells us that Perpetua's son, Thascius, "was made a proselyte to the Christian faith by Caecilius a presbyter, whose name he afterwards assumed. He was elected bishop of Carthage A.D. 249, and

²⁰⁹ Sarah Flower Adams, *Vivia Perpetua: A Dramatic Poem in Five Acts* (London: Charles Fox, 1841).

suffered martyrdom by the sword A.D. 258.”²¹⁰ Thus we have the intriguing possibility that Perpetua was the mother of Cyprian!

Adams does offer solutions to some of the mysteries of the *Passio* which have given pause to scholars restricted to factual investigation. The case of Perpetua's unmentioned husband is in point. In the play we find that Perpetua is not only a widow but also "wert the wife of one of noble blood."²¹¹ Adams wants a Perpetua whose status is settled and whose high social class is confirmed not only by her father but also by her husband. Perpetua's conversion to Christianity comes not quietly after study at home or after instruction in a house church, but dramatically alone in the Temple of Jupiter Olympus where, at the altar of the god, she proclaims aloud, "I am no longer worshiper of thine!" and swears "That on thine altar set for evermore, A firm renouncing seal--I am a Christian!"²¹² Anticipating the feminist interpretations which were to come well over a century later, Adams shows the reader that Perpetua's unladylike behavior causes as much concern as do her doctrinal beliefs. Statius, a noble Roman, comments

Thus much I know of her,--that she hath stepp'd
Out of the province that befits a woman,
Whose duty is, to keep within the house;
If maiden, subject to her father's will;
If wife obedient to her husband's rule; If mother, careful only for her
children;--
She hath forgot herself,--you must forget her.²¹³

Adams seems to be saying through Statius that, beyond her religious beliefs, it is Perpetua's refusal to conform to the patriarchal norm that really gets her into

²¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

²¹¹ Ibid., 35.

²¹² Ibid., 49-50.

²¹³ Ibid., 126.

trouble.

One of Perpetua's longest speeches of the play comes in the final act when she recounts her dreams. While the dream sequences come early on in the *Passio*, Adams chooses to place them at the end of her play for dramatic effect. Interestingly, Adams has Perpetua interpret the dreams herself as she tells her fellow Christians about them. It is as if she is saying that there is no room for misinterpretation when the dreamer herself explains the meaning of her own dream symbols. The ladder is "a voice I needs must follow"; the garden is the "garden of the Lord! O Paradise!"; the shepherd is "God...who led his flocks"; the milk is a "sacrament of heaven."²¹⁴ And those dressed in white are Christians who are singing "Hallelujah! amen! for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth."²¹⁵ Adams does not want to leave interpretive freedom to the reader; we are told what the dream signifies.

To the modern reader, *Vivia Perpetua* seems a curiosity, as stilted and old-fashioned in its theology as it is in its language. The pseudo-Shakespearian dialogue falls flat and none of the characters seem to possess any real life on the page or, one imagines, on the stage. Early twentieth century critics have lamented "the artlessness of the construction and the conventionality of the stage accessories" and have found the play "but modestly interesting."²¹⁶ More recently, however, feminist readers have been kinder to Adams, commenting that the play "stresses that becoming a Christian under Roman patriarchal law was a defiant assertion of autonomy" and noting that in *Vivia Perpetua* "slaves and women share a closer experience than do men and

²¹⁴ Ibid., 159-61.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 161.

²¹⁶ *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921-1922), 101.

women of the same social standing.”²¹⁷

While Musurillo’s translation of the entire *Passio* is complete in a compact thirteen pages, the French author Rene du Mesnil de Maricourt (1829-1893) has managed to write a 432 page novel based on Perpetua’s life as he imagined it. *Vivia Perpetua; or, The martyrs of Carthage*²¹⁸ has as one of its principal characters Perpetua’s invented (once again) husband, Marcus, a loyal Roman soldier who “when the evil tendencies of his nature...were stimulated by calumnies against the Christians...became a violent and bitter persecutor.”²¹⁹ When Perpetua, who in the novel is given a young daughter, Eva, becomes a Christian and is baptized, the stage is set for a confrontation not with her father (as in the *Passio*) but with Marcus. He leaves her when he discovers her conversion and she is banished with Eva to the desert, there to live among what de Maricourt describes as the half-savage tribes. Meanwhile, Marcus is befriended by a Christian priest, Zephyrinus, who explains to him that Christians “have ever shown themselves the most devoted subjects of the Emperor”²²⁰ and that one can be both a good Roman and a good Christian. Convinced by this representation, Marcus rushes to the side of his wife and daughter in the desert, just in time to see little Eva die of an unknown illness.

Perpetua and Marcus conceive another child, a son, and return with him to Carthage where they are all arrested and thrown into prison. Clearly, the Roman authorities had not been convinced that Zephyrinus’ argument was

²¹⁷ *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 9.

²¹⁸ Rene du Mesnil de Maricourt, *Vivia Perpetua; or, The martyrs of Carthage*, trans. from the second French edition (New York: P. O’Shea, 1873).

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

sound. Marcus is the first to be sentenced; he is judged as a soldier to have betrayed his trust and is condemned to die by the axe, his head severed neatly by a single blow. Presumably he is entitled to this swifter and kinder death because of his rank and his citizenship. Perpetua's execution is next and is a much slower and crueller affair, even though she too is a citizen and of good birth. Following the general outline of the *Passio*, she encounters a mad cow, undergoes several humiliations and dies guiding a gladiator's sword to her throat. In a final chapter, Perpetua's strength and faith are discussed and praised by survivors of the Carthage persecution who, for an unexplained reason, end up at the foot of Mt. Ararat.

Like di Brunasi's libretto, de Maricourt's book creates for Perpetua a soldier husband who turns from his pagan ways and becomes a Christian, one suspects as much for love as for theological conviction. Other major liberties taken with the *Passio* include only passing mention of Felicity and no inclusion of dreams at all. There is an obvious effort to show that Christianity was compatible with Roman civil law and only those Romans who were brutish, dumb or both could not see this compatibility. Perpetua is portrayed as a bourgeois nineteenth century woman who seeks to reconcile her responsibilities as a daughter, wife and mother with her religious convictions and succeeds. Love, duty and faith are seen not as sources of conflict, as they are in the *Passio*, but as reconcilable elements in everyday life. Perpetua's martyrdom is relegated to the status of an unfortunate mistake on the part of some misinformed officials rather than as a dramatic testimony of a young woman's faith courage.

Alex Miller, a contemporary Australian writer, uses the Perpetua story as

the chief motif of his novel, *Conditions of Faith*.²²¹ Set in Australia, France and Tunisia in the 1920s, the book portrays its heroine--a bright and attractive young Australian named Emily Stanton Elder--as facing many of the same dilemmas with which Perpetua grappled, such as parental obedience, faith, independence, motherhood, and nascent feminism. In the novel, Miller has Emily (i) marry a staid, hardworking engineer, (ii) leave Australia for France, where she has a brief sexual encounter with another man, (iii) visit Tunisia and the site of Perpetua's prison, where she is given a copy of the *Passio*, and (iv) decide that she must seek personal fulfillment even if it means abandoning her young child.

Early on in the novel one of the characters asks rhetorically "why the word passion serves both for the torments of sexual desire and for the suffering of the martyrs."²²² Miller's answer, provided through Emily's voice, is that it is a somewhat mad search for the truth which links the two experiences. In her own search for the truth, Emily finds herself drawn to the story of Perpetua as she explores the ruins of ancient Carthage. In the company of a French priest, an American museum curator and a western-educated Arab nationalist, she confronts the differing explanations for Perpetua's imprisonment and death. Hakim, the Arab, explains to her that

If you ask Delattre [the French priest], he'll tell you she was a martyr of the Holy Roman Church. The Christians claimed her and made a saint of her. But I say she was a misunderstood Berber woman and her life was a mystery. She was a young married woman from a respectable family and she waited for days in there to die in the arena and no one really knows why.²²³

²²¹ Alex Miller, *Conditions of Faith* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

²²² *Ibid.*, 93.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 148.

Emily senses that the mystery of Perpetua's life might have relevance to her own, and she seeks to discover why Perpetua had her dreams, wrote her diary and why she gave herself up to the Romans. Hakim warns her not to trust the editor of the *Passio*, whom he accepts as Tertullian, musing that

She must have given her diary to Tertullian for safekeeping, probably the night before she was killed. It's a murder mystery. The Romans murdered her. No one denies that. But why did she give up her baby and desert her family? What were her real motives? Tertullian says she did it for the nonsense of eternal life. European historians have let Tertullian's explanation that she was a Christian martyr stand without ever questioning it. Her case has remained closed since Tertullian gave us his verdict. No one since then has asked what her real motives might have been in acting as she did.²²⁴

Of course, the fictional Hakim (speaking, one presumes, for the author) may have been right about the paucity of clashing interpretations in the 1920s. But, as this thesis shows, how many questions since then have been asked about Perpetua's motives!

Miller's characters continue their suspicions about Tertullian as the novel progresses. Emily and a friend theorize that given Perpetua's fluency of expression and skill as a writer, she must have written more than just the *Passio*, and that Tertullian may have suppressed whatever else she wrote for his own theological and political reasons. When Emily leaves Tunisia and returns to Paris, she visits the Bibliotheque Sainte-Genevieve and immerses herself in Tertullian's works. She concludes that "it was not possible that this man could have been the confident and friend of any woman."²²⁵ Tertullian, for Emily, distorts Perpetua's story in his eagerness to promote his own cause.

²²⁴ Ibid., 156.

²²⁵ Ibid., 194.

Whether Miller himself shares all of his protagonist's views is uncertain, but it is clear that his sympathies lie with her.

The novel approaches its denouement with Emily researching and writing her own scholarly book, *The Secular Perpetua*, in which she maintains that it was not Perpetua's death that was her supreme sacrifice, but the passing of her son "through the bars of her cell to her father, knowing that she was never to see the child again."²²⁶ As Emily becomes stronger in her will to become her own person, she finds herself making a sacrifice that imitates Perpetua's:

One goes by small degrees, one step at a time, until one stands at last on the place from which one refuses to be moved. And one is more astonished than anyone to see it is oneself who does this. This was Perpetua's gift to me. ...It is why Tertullian, and those who followed him, required her silence. What she did could never be acknowledged. For she broke the chain by which mothers are compelled.²²⁷

Miller's Perpetua and Miller's Emily are feminists before their times. They face the tension which exists between a woman's assigned role as daughter-wife-mother and her assumed role as an independent being capable of making existential choices.

While *Conditions of Faith* and the other three works we have considered are fiction, they take no greater liberties with the text of the *Passio* than do many of those scholars whose interpretations we have reviewed in the earlier sections of this chapter. If Tracy is correct in his assertion that to determine criteria of adequacy we must pay attention to the authenticity of a writer's subjectivity,²²⁸ then we should accept Miller, di Brunassi, Adams, and de Maricourt as authentic. They are telling the truth about Perpetua as they see it,

²²⁶ Ibid., 326.

²²⁷ Ibid., 346.

²²⁸ Tracy, 69

no less than did Augustine or do contemporary scholars. Miller's novel and the other three fictional accounts we have considered, like the text which Perpetua left behind, contain enough factual material to make the story appear historically founded, yet leave enough unsaid so that our imaginations are stimulated. Just as Emily does in Miller's book, the reader is encouraged to ask about the unstated and unrecorded elements of all women's lives, their motives and conflicts, their passions and sacrifices.

Popular

In tracing the trajectory of possible interpretations of Perpetua and her dreams, we have followed a chronology that has taken us from Greco-Roman times to the present. Another parallel path that might be explored is a trajectory that moves from elite analyses (e.g., Augustine, Freud, modern religious scholars) to popular appropriations of the story. Ricoeur has proposed that the meaning of a text is dynamic and fluid and that readers always self-project themselves into a text as they read it. In this manner they appropriate from a text what they want and need; they make their own what once was alien.²²⁹ A review of both textual and pictorial material available on the internet illustrates how different groups have appropriated Perpetua and have seen in her life and story a validation of their own lives and stories.

The Office of Black Catholics of the Archdiocese of Washington, in a web page celebrating Black Catholic History Month, submits that "Black Catholics trace their faith history back to Christian antiquity long before other nations heard the 'Good News'."²³⁰ Among the saints portrayed as black and claimed

²²⁹ See Ricoeur, 43 and 94.

²³⁰ Michael Scott, "Black History Month," *Office of Black Catholics*, <http://www.adw.org/culture/officeblack_month.html>, (21 January 2001).

as faith ancestors of modern African-American Catholics are Perpetua and Felicity. Another web page, the Catholic Community Forum, offers a summary of Perpetua's life and martyrdom, including the notation that she is the patron saint of cattle (presumably because she was meant to fight a wild cow in the amphitheater). A portrait of her on this page shows her embracing Felicity; both are depicted as black.²³¹ It is interesting to note that a prayer card available at religious book shops shows Perpetua as white and Felicity as black, perhaps assuming that because the latter was the former's slave the American white/black master/slave paradigm should prevail. The *Passio* itself makes no reference to the skin color of either woman, allowing room for speculation on the part of those who wish to see a Perpetua in their own image.

A web page sponsored by Integrity/Virginia, which describes itself as "worshiping in witness to the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia and the gay and lesbian community," includes Perpetua and Felicity in a list of gay and lesbian saints.²³² The *Passio* is silent on the subject of Perpetua's sexual orientation and Integrity/Virginia notes only that she and Felicity died together as friends and kissed as they were martyred. Whether this was the kiss of peace or something more is left to the reader to decide. The Christian History Institute provides a page titled "Christianity Elevates Women" which contains a graphic showing a fully-clothed Perpetua and Felicity kneeling together as two men dressed as Roman soldiers stand above them, with short swords drawn, ready for the kill.²³³ The accompanying text calls both women heroines of the faith and

²³¹ *Catholic Community Forum*, <<http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintp14.htm>>, (21 January 2001).

²³² *Integrity/Virginia*, <http://integrityva.org/gay_saints.htm>, (21 January 2001).

²³³ "Glimpses From Across Church History," *Christian History Institute*, <<http://www.gospelcom.net/chi/WOMENSF/womn03.shtml>>, (21 January 2001).

describes Felicity as being like a sister to Perpetua. Integrity/Virginia and the Christian History Institute each see the *Passio* as describing Perpetua in a relationship with Felicity which is in harmony with its own views on sexuality.

Although one can argue that the *Passio* indicates that Perpetua voluntarily gave up her child, there is a popular view of her as a guardian of mothers who are separated from their children, particularly of those mothers who are in prison. A prayer on one web site calls upon the saint to “watch over all mothers and children who are separated from each other because of war or persecution. Show a special care to mothers who are imprisoned and guide them to follow your example of faith and courage.”²³⁴ These web pages confirm the public character of the Perpetua story and its ongoing ability to stimulate what Tracy calls the “‘disclosure’ possibilities of new meaning and truth for the situation to which the interpretation is applied.”²³⁵

The “Real” Perpetua in Her Historical Setting

It is instructive to recognize that Perpetua herself, as Nolan observantly points out, “provides no interpretation of her revelations, but seems rather moved to tell us about them merely because they occurred.”²³⁶ Perhaps that is because in antiquity dreams may have been so much a part of life, so integrated with and equal to waking reality, that there was no need to struggle with interpretive theory. Dreams were as expected and as inexplicable as the rising of the sun or the blowing of the wind. “By way of contrast,” Robeck notes, “the

²³⁴ Terry Matz, *Catholic Online Saints*, <<http://saints.catholic.org/saints/perpetua.html>>, (4 February 2001).

²³⁵ Tracy, 68.

²³⁶ Nolan, 35.

redactor saw much more in these accounts than their initial purposes."²³⁷ And ever since that original editing, other interpreters have been adding to the corpus so that today it is difficult if not impossible to find the real Perpetua, whose dreams may not have been religious, classical, feminist or psychological, but "primarily personal in nature, providing her with strength and comfort in her last days."²³⁸

Then why do we continue to study Perpetua's dreams and why are we still riveted by the story of her life, whether told in scholarly articles or in works of fiction? Perhaps because regardless of the debates over authorship and interpretive posture, dream narratives of this sort have historic value since "they are evidence for what people 'believed' at the time the legends took shape."²³⁹ We can assume that since the Christians of third century North Africa preserved Perpetua's dream account and martyrdom story, indeed cherished it, it must have spoken to their concerns. They must have identified with her and shared at least some of her beliefs, for "the object of writing saints' lives was to edify and gratify the reader."²⁴⁰ Since Perpetua was a catechumen, still under instruction, it is most likely that "the beliefs and aspirations reflected in [her] visions and behavior indicate current catechetical teaching, one of the more reliable indices of a group's basic tenets."²⁴¹ The North African audience would have been sympathetic to the "pervasive apocalyptic tenor and instances of belief and prophecy and direct divine inspiration" which confirmed their "strong pro-Montanist tendencies."²⁴² The dream records would have been useful,

²³⁷ Robeck, 87.

²³⁸ Ibid., 93

²³⁹ Attwater, 13.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

²⁴¹ Wilson-Kastner, 2.

²⁴² Ibid.

hortatory documents for the leaders of the community to employ in their mission.

That the dreams remained important and succeeded in inspiring later generations of Christians is made clear by historians who have found that “Every year, on the anniversary of her martyrdom, Perpetua’s words were read aloud to the assembled parishioners in the various churches in north Africa.”²⁴³ The dreams resonated so well with the common people that “Augustine himself had to warn sternly that her words, her views, were not canonical scripture.”²⁴⁴ If Perpetua’s dreams tell us something about the early Christians, they are also informative about Roman authority at the time. We cannot know for certain, but the fact that the jailers, judges and general public seemed relatively unflustered by Perpetua’s martyrdom and appeared accustomed to dealing with the situations which it presented, leads one to imagine that Perpetua was not the first or only woman prisoner the Romans had to deal with in greater Carthage. The Roman harshness in dealing with Perpetua also suggests that problems of conversion and rebelliousness were troubling to the local administration and, perhaps, not uncommon.

Perpetua’s dreams have been recorded, by her or by an editor or by an anonymous author, with great artistry. It is partially for this reason that they have continued to stimulate comment and excite critics for so long and why they have so appealed to writers of fiction. Many interpreters, however, may have ignored or distorted the real Perpetua in her historical setting in an attempt to further their own theoretical agendas. A more sound approach may be to acknowledge how her dreams reflect the situation of the early church in Carthage and Roman authority in North Africa. Dreams may or may not speak

²⁴³ Shaw, 33.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 37.

to us about God and sex and political resistance; but they definitely speak to us about history.

In this chapter we have seen that the number of differing and resourceful interpretations seem limited only by the curiosity of the interpreter and his or her own particular preunderstandings. And because of this variety, the text continues to live. We will see in Chapter Five that a similar observation can be made about institutions and their boards of trustees. An open and pluralistic board produces new ideas and enables an institution to remain vibrant and relevant. But before turning from Perpetua to questions of trusteeship, we will consider one further approach to Perpetua's dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION: PERPETUA'S DREAMS AS AN EXAMPLE OF HOW WOMEN HAVE USED DREAMS TO PROMOTE THEIR RIGHT TO RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

For those who may be unconvinced or uncomfortable with the approaches and interpretive theories of the writers discussed thus far, I have provided in this chapter my own alternative approach. It is that we may view Perpetua's dreams as an aid which she employed to help her accomplish her goals. The dreams thus become important not only for the images they contain but also for how they were used by the dreamer. We turn from dream theory to dream application, from the dream as an object to the dream as a weapon. We may see Perpetua's dreams as propelling her as a woman into a place of leadership--for however brief a time--in her community. We may consider her dreams as an instrument which she wielded to voice, promote and justify a women's right to religious expression. Perpetua was not unique in this regard. One can argue that women prophets and preachers across the centuries, in North Africa, Europe and America, have utilized their dreams as weapons of empowerment and as vehicles which helped them achieve the ends they sought. To illustrate this use of dreams and dream interpretation, this chapter will examine the dreams not only of Perpetua, but also of five other women: Hildegard of Bingen, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Jackson, and Elleanor Knight. We will ask of each the following questions:

1. What were the circumstances surrounding the dreamer when she had the dream and how might those circumstances have affected the dream?
2. What was the nature of the dream?
3. Did the dream come “naturally” or was it incubated or induced?
4. How was the dream reported and recorded?
5. Did the dream help or hinder the dreamer’s religious expression?

I will argue that it was principally because of their dreams that these women were able to rise above their marginalized status in society and become forces in their communities and in the wider world. Because their dreams were accepted by men in power as coming from God, these women’s ideas could be viewed by men not as the fancies of women, which might well be unacceptable in a patriarchal society, but as the ideas of God. The power structure from the second through the nineteenth centuries placed men above women, but it also placed God above men. If a woman could somehow demonstrate that what she wanted to achieve was God’s will expressed through her in a dream or vision, she could defeat the system which subjugated her. Without the validation which dreams deemed to come from God provided, it is doubtful that the religious expression which these women realized would have been possible. Dreams were forces which neutralized gender and overturned the existing power structure. The dreamer spoke for God and the dream thus became a privileged form of communication which carried with it influence and a compelling magnetism. A man could deny a woman the opportunity to speak out, to organize, to lead and to govern; but no man could deny those opportunities to one who spoke for the deity.

As we consider these six women dreamers and how their dreams

conferred unusual power and a special status upon them, we may see how Perpetua's dream experiences, far from being unique or bizarre, fall into a category of motivational dreaming which women have utilized throughout history.

Perpetua

As the *Passio* continually reminds us, Perpetua was female: a daughter, sister and mother. In the society of the Roman Empire of her day, even a literate, upper-class young woman like Perpetua would have been subordinate to both her father and her husband and bound to do their bidding. She also would have been expected to defer to men on issues of family, politics and religion. Even in the emerging Christian community of Carthage, it is probable that a woman's role in the church was limited, with few opportunities to lead and minister. One can argue that it was Perpetua's dreams which enabled her to ignore these expectations and to assume a posture of defiance toward the men in her family, and take on a position of leadership in her small Christian community.

Perpetua's first dream, we may remember, was triggered by her brother who reminded her that she was greatly privileged as a confessor and could ask for a vision to discover whether she was to be condemned or freed. She replied that she would, because she knew that she could speak with the Lord. There is a certain intentionality in this statement, a certain dogged confidence. Perpetua's dreams did not come to her by chance; she actively sought them as a means of problem solving, as a guide to the future, and as an aid to what she must have seen as her mission. Perpetua purposefully set out to have her

dreams. They were to be a device which would allow her to express herself in a forum which might otherwise have been closed to her.

As we have seen, Perpetua's dreams themselves were filled with symbols which can be subject to various interpretations. Much scholarly effort has been expended over the analysis of these symbols and the relationship of them to other texts and practices. Is it not possible, however, that an exact reading of the dreams is less important than what Perpetua did with them? We must not forget to observe how Perpetua used her dreams and how they served her purposes in the brief time she had remaining to her. Because of her dreams, Perpetua was able to inspire, motivate and strengthen the resolve of her community at a time when at least some Christians were being persecuted. Her advice and counsel were accepted by men above her in status and rank. Men who had a longer association with the church and a higher position within it deferred to her. Perpetua, a woman meant to be an obedient follower, became a leader. Salisbury writes that Perpetua's "qualifications for leadership were clearly her dreams and visions which were believed to be prophetic. Just as Paul put prophets above priests and deacons, Perpetua...placed prophetic martyrs over more official figures."²⁴⁵ Her dreams erased the hierarchical and patriarchal structure of both the church and the Roman/North African society of the early third century and enabled her, as a woman speaking for God, to solidify and preserve the nascent Christian community. Had she not dreamt, reported her dreams to her fellow Christians, and recorded the details in a diary, would she have been allowed to act as she did and command a position of deference? Probably not. Although women did have some authority in the

²⁴⁵ Salisbury, 66.

early church, it was nevertheless circumscribed by the rules of the broader social milieu in which they lived. Perpetua may have been a Christian, from a good family, and literate in three languages, but she still was a woman whose place was subservient to the men in her household, church and city, and whose "life as a Roman woman was structured...to preserve the social order."²⁴⁶

Perpetua's dreams not only promoted her to a position of authority in the Christian community, they also enabled her to defy the wishes of her father whom she "vanquished along with his diabolical arguments." (*Pass.* 3. 3) It was highly unusual for a young woman to oppose the wishes of her father in the ancient world. As Daniel Hoffman writes, Perpetua managed to "transcend the expectations placed on the female sex by becoming a man (in one of her revelations) and by exhibiting extreme bravery in contests in the arena."²⁴⁷ Hoffman's implication is that without the impetus of her dreams and the sense of assuredness which they gave her, Perpetua would not have been as defiant of her father nor as brave in the arena as she was. Perpetua relied on her dreams and they justified her religious expression and her departure from the restrictive, sexist norms of her time.

Hildegard of Bingen

If Perpetua's life was tragically short and her dreams relatively focused, the biography and oneiric experiences of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) were quite the opposite. Where Perpetua's dream symbols and images were relatively simple and concrete, Hildegard's were quite complex and abstract. Hildegard's lifespan exceeded eighty-one years, and her many talents brought

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 12.

²⁴⁷ Hoffman, 170.

her recognition from and contact with the major European figures of her time. Barbara Newman, observing Hildegard's varied abilities and successes, reminds us that she was an abbess, a spiritual counselor, a physician, a theologian, a writer, an artist, a musician, a reformer and a preacher.²⁴⁸ Peter Dronke aptly calls her "an overpowering, electrifying presence--and in many ways an enigmatic one."²⁴⁹

Although Hildegard's visions began when she was but three years old, it was not until forty years later that she started to record them, as she explained, at God's direction. Hildegard's visions, like Perpetua's dreams, allowed her to rise above the limitations which men placed upon women in medieval Europe. Newman goes so far as to suppose that "Were it not for the visions, she would not have preached or written at all" and that "had she not claimed her gift as a mark of divine authority, no one would have listened to her."²⁵⁰ One can only imagine the frustrations that a person with Hildegard's intelligence, capabilities and drive might have felt had she not been able--somehow--to exercise her considerable skills. She was circumspect, however, in the competences she chose to exhibit and the battles she chose to fight. Women in the medieval period were prohibited from preaching, and Hildegard did not actually oppose this stricture. While she has become an icon for many contemporary feminists, Hildegard herself "supported the exclusion of women from the clergy and other forms of female subordination."²⁵¹ Perhaps, like many single minded geniuses, Hildegard was less interested in the liberation of the many, in this case women,

²⁴⁸ Barbara Newman, *Sisters of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xviii.

²⁴⁹ Dronke, 144.

²⁵⁰ Newman, 34.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

than she was in finding an outlet for her own prodigious abilities.

Newman writes that

Never did she suggest that as a woman and a Christian, she had any “right” to teach or prophesy in the Church. Nor did she claim or demand equality with men. Rather, she insisted that God had chosen a poor, frail, untutored woman like herself to reveal his mysteries only because those to whom he had first entrusted them--the wise, learned, and masculine clergy--had failed to obey.²⁵²

What do we make of a confident, dominant, creative, successful person who, in a letter to Elizabeth of Schonau, insists that she is “a mere poor woman; a vessel of clay” whose abilities and writings came “not from me but from the clear light”?²⁵³ Perhaps Hildegard protests too much. Perhaps what she really means is that the larger society around her would have indeed considered her a “poor woman”--without power, money, or formal education--had she not had her visionary experiences. That is, she would have been like most women in the middle ages. However, because of her visions she exercises the kind of authority usually reserved to men of rank. Her visions ensure that she will be taken seriously. They enabled her to participate creatively, politically, theologically and administratively in a society that otherwise would have been closed to her.

Hildegard was not above using her visions to get her own way. Sabina Flanagan notes that “Hildegard’s strategy was to attempt to convert others to her point of view by claiming knowledge of the divine will, as against their ignorance or possible malevolence.”²⁵⁴ In other words, Hildegard used her

²⁵² Ibid., 3.

²⁵³ Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings*, ed. Fiona Bowie and Oliva Davies, trans. Robert Carver (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 1999), 130.

²⁵⁴ Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179: A Visionary Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), 182.

visions as a weapon of personal empowerment, much as others might have used wealth, family, position, beauty, oratory or intellectual brilliance to forward their own personal agendas.

Does this imply that Hildegard's visions were not real, that she self-servingly composed them to help her win her battles? Does it imply that the visions were bogus, or at least exaggerated and modified in the translation from interior image to the exterior written word? Not necessarily. Flanagan finds that

Ever since her experience of 1141, when she felt herself compelled by God to write down her visions, she believed her life was set in a prophetic mold. Accordingly, she saw herself as the mouthpiece of the Lord, merely conveying his messages to her hearers and readers. Moreover, a woman could be a prophet without upsetting the perceived natural order.²⁵⁵

Hildegard felt her entire life to be inspired by God and so we must view her goals and actions as also being so inspired. When one is convinced that one is leading a life touched by God, the question of whether a particular vision does or does not come wholly "through the inspiration of divine mystery" becomes moot.²⁵⁶ Because Hildegard's life was inspired, her messages were God's messages and God's messages were hers.

However, it should be noted that Hildegard did write down her visions as a means of making them public, and this has led some scholars to conclude that her visionary mode was a mere literary device, akin to the techniques used, for example, in the *Shepherd of Hermas* to move a plot forward. Others have even attributed the "clear light" and "burning flame" of the visions to migraines to which Hildegard may have been prone.²⁵⁷ These speculations cannot be

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 13-14.

²⁵⁶ Hildegard, 127.

²⁵⁷ Flanagan, 191 and 199.

proved or disproved. What is certain is that Hildegard's visions did reflect the concerns she had at the time the vision occurred. There was a definite relationship between the challenges Hildegard faced in her "normal" or "waking" life and the visions which provided solutions to those challenges. Whatever their origin--God, literary technique, migraines--they helped her express herself in a world that did not welcome women's argumentation or preaching. They advanced her point of view. They justified the actions she wished to take and "provided psychological benefits for Hildegard, giving her the courage and authority to act in ways which would otherwise have been difficult, perhaps impossible, for persons of her status, education, and gender."²⁵⁸ Like Perpetua, Hildegard did not let her dreams lie fallow; she used them.

Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Rebecca Jackson and Elleanor Knight

Over eight hundred years separate Perpetua from Hildegard and another seven hundred separate Hildegard from the four women preachers considered in the following paragraphs. Yet the issues remain the same. How do women who feel moved to preach, who have the abilities to lead and the intelligence to make meaningful contributions to religious discourse get a hearing in a male dominated world that limits their expression? The answer to this rhetorical question is through the use of their dreams and visions. I have grouped Lee, Elaw, Jackson and Knight together more because of their historical overlap than because of other similarities, although similarities do indeed exist. Lee was born in 1783, Elaw in 1790, Jackson in 1795 and Knight in 1799. Three were black, all became preachers, all were independent of mainline Protestant denominations and all had lively dream and visionary experiences.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 199.

Jarena Lee's (1783-1837) dreams and visions came at critical points in her extraordinary life, motivating her and advising her as to the correct path to take when difficult choices had to be made. Lee was born in New Jersey and moved to Philadelphia where she sought an opportunity to preach and lead prayer meetings. Her belief in God and her commitment to a religious life were a direct result of a vivid vision she had of Satan, "in the form of a monstrous dog, and in a rage, as if in pursuit, his tongue protruding from his mouth to a great length, and his eyes looked like two balls of fire."²⁵⁹ Only God could save her from such a beast and so she dedicated herself to God's work. A few years later, her call to become a preacher came in the guise of "a voice" which told her "Preach the gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends."²⁶⁰ As a black woman, with no formal education or theological training, Lee must have welcomed her "voice" as an indication that the learning she lacked was not necessary for her ministry. Like both Perpetua and Hildegard, Lee did not claim that she herself wanted to preach or that the words she spoke were of her own invention; the words came from God. Her visions gave her the confidence to face a society which was largely set against her mission and they provided a reason for it. It was God's will that she preach, not hers. Another crucial dream came when Lee was sick and despairing. In it, the sun was "obscured by a dense black cloud, which continued to hide its rays for about one-third part of the day, and then it burst forth again with renewed splendor."²⁶¹ This she interpreted as God's encouragement of her vocation and a justification of her request to the newly

²⁵⁹ Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1849), 6.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

organized African Methodist Episcopal Church that she be allowed to preach.

Lee wrote her account of her dreams well after they occurred. Unlike Perpetua and Hildegard, she did not employ a dream text as a kind of propaganda weapon, nor did she incubate or induce her dreams as they did. The dreams came, it appears, unexpectedly and seemed to be boosters or aids to Lee herself rather than instructions which were meant to be conveyed to the general public by her. Lee had dreams which advised her on her marriage, visions of Christ which reinforced her belief, and supernatural sensations which bade her change her travel plans to avoid pending disasters. One might well argue that in the absence of role models, in the absence of the guidance of institutional hierarchies, teachers and counselors, Lee relied on her dreams for hope and direction, and as a means of building her confidence.

Zilpha Elaw (1790-1846) also began her calling to ministry with a dream. Born outside of Philadelphia, Elaw was one of twenty-two children and was sent to live as a servant to a Quaker family when she was twelve. Her dreams began during this period of service. She writes in her autobiography that "It was a prevailing notion...that whatever a person dreamed between the times of twilight and sunrise, was prophetically ominous, and would shortly come to pass."²⁶² Thus we see that the common wisdom in nineteenth century Pennsylvania was the same as it was in ancient Carthage and medieval Germany; dreams were predictive and carried both weight and authority. Elaw's first dream, like Lee's vision of Satan, was horrific in its images of "the awful terrors of the day of judgment."²⁶³ It was followed by a vision of a "tall figure [with] long hair which

²⁶² Zilpha Elaw, "Memories of the Life, Religious Experience, Ministerial Travels, and Labours of Mrs. Elaw" in *Sisters of the Spirit*, ed. and into. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 55.

²⁶³ Ibid.

parted in the front and came down on his shoulders...he stood with open arms and smiled upon me."²⁶⁴ The combination of the imagery of the terrors of hell and the love of Christ remained in Elaw's mind for the rest of her life.

Elaw herself did not have a great number of visions (although she did go into trances regularly at camp meetings) but a "swoon" or dream of her sister gave impetus to her preaching career. Elaw writes that her sister

had seen Jesus, and had been in the society of angels; and that an angel came to her, and bade her tell Zilpha that she must preach the gospel; and also that I must go to a lady named Fisher, a Quakeress, and that she would tell me further what I should do...and my dear sister was pressingly urgent for me to begin and preach directly.²⁶⁵

Here it is someone else's dream, Elaw's sister's, that initiates her life's work. Such was the belief in the accuracy and inerrancy of dreams that even the dream of another person was reason enough to justify a career decision. Would Elaw have become a preacher without the stimulus of her sister's dream? Of course we cannot know this for sure. But she hadn't sought to preach before the dream and she did afterward. At a minimum, the dream encouraged her to do what she was already thinking about doing; and possibly it did much more. By 1817, Elaw believed that the dreams and trances she was experiencing were indications of the sanctification of the soul by God and that she was therefore meant to preach and evangelize. Gayle T. Tate notes that "This sort of sanctification experience of being totally in harmony with the Divine Will enabled women to withstand societal criticism for their nontraditional ministerial roles."²⁶⁶

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 73.

²⁶⁶ Gayle T. Tate, "Zilpha Elaw," in *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 1, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (New York: Carlson Publishing Company, 1993), 388.

In her introduction to the writings of Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795-1871), Jean McMahon Humez acknowledges that Jackson's autobiography is "centrally concerned with how religious vision and ecstatic experience functioned for her and other women of her time as a source of personal power, enabling them to make radical change in the outward circumstances of their lives."²⁶⁷ The argument which has been presented in this chapter could not be better summarized. Jackson's dreams and visions were more frequent and prolific than any of the other nineteenth century women under consideration. Jackson, who was born near Philadelphia and lived there and in New York, had her first dream experience in 1830. She brought on many of her dream experiences herself through incubatory techniques which "invited the 'gifts' or supernatural experiences of various kinds that gave her power over the destructive, menacing forces she confronted, both inside herself and in the outside world."²⁶⁸ Jackson is a clear example of a woman who induced her own dreams, recorded them in detail, and shaped them to her own purpose. Dreams for Jackson were a means of instruction, an inner library, a mentor-substitute, or as Humez puts it, "a source of instruction that could be relied on absolutely."²⁶⁹ For someone without easy access to the resources and tools available to educated, privileged, white males, dreams and visions were an effective substitute.

Humez cautions her readers that the images, language, and plots of Jackson's dreams must be interpreted in the context of her time, status, race, and particular location. Through such a lens, they need not be mystical,

²⁶⁷ Jean McMahon Humez, ed. and intro., *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 1.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

esoteric or hermetic. Like Hildegard, Jackson's dream work followed certain religious-symbolic conventions. These conventions "would have been familiar [to] a woman growing up in a black Methodist churchgoing environment in the early nineteenth century,"²⁷⁰ but may be less accessible to those reading the text from a secular, twenty-first century standpoint. This is good general advice to anyone seeking to understand the writings of a past age, and especially appropriate when those writings concern dreams tied to a special place and time. Humez observes that Jackson's dreams "often incorporate the familiar female routine domestic labors--cooking, cleaning, sewing, caring for children,"²⁷¹ even though those activities may be given specifically Christian or moral interpretations. The use of such "simple" symbols underlines Jackson's expressed position that one need not be a trained theologian or educated and ordained minister to preach God's word.

Jackson's dreams also served to confirm her own decisions at turning points in her life. Dreams led her to an important compromise with the Shaker Eldress of a Watervliet, N.Y. religious community which she had joined. They also led her to change her residence and to begin a formal study of the Bible. Again, like Hildegard, she used her dreams as signposts; and those signposts more often than not indicated the path she herself had already set out to follow. Like Perpetua, she used her dreams to gain a hearing and to speak and act with an authority that otherwise would have been denied her.

Elleanor Knight (1799-18??) was the wife of an abusive alcoholic in Cranston, Rhode Island, when she received a call to preach in 1829. It came in a dream which began with "a nightmarish image of her past life" and ended with

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 47.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 49.

a guide telling her she must become a preacher.²⁷² Her husband, friends and local ministers all insisted that she was being deceived by her dreams, and they condemned her ambitions. She left Cranston and traveled throughout New England, holding prayer meetings where she could, most often among Freewill Baptist congregations. According to Catherine Brekus, Knight's dream experience was not uncommon and could be found in the stories of many women preachers who "had heard Christ's voice calling to them in dreams."²⁷³ While men were able to study for the ministry and rely on institutional support in their careers, women learned from and were buoyed by a personal encounter with God in their dreams. Brekus finds that "all female preachers, whether white or black, described their calls to preach as...beyond their control."²⁷⁴ Since society did not permit women the individual right to choose preaching as a vocation, the choice had to come from outside themselves. And it did, from their dreams.

In this rapid and selective examination of how dreams empowered women to exercise religious leadership, what tentative conclusions might we draw? First, dreams came most often to those women that sought them, whether knowingly, purposefully, unconsciously or through others. There may be, of course, untold numbers of women to whom dreams came unsought; but few of these women have left textual records of their dream experiences. The records we do have suggest that women who wanted dreams usually received them. Second, the reporting of a dream, the converting of the dream images into a text, enhances the dream's power and the authority of the dreamer. It

²⁷² Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 163.

²⁷³ Ibid., 166.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 185.

also contributes to the longevity of the dream story and almost guarantees an ongoing procession of differing interpretations. This is so because, as Harold Evans and Lionel Trilling have noted, “an idea derived from reading is not a unitary, irrefragable thing but something modified in its transmission by the cultural community into which it falls, by the response to the language, by the power of understanding of those who receive it and by their purpose and intentions.”²⁷⁵ Third, in every case a reported dream helped advance the cause of the dreamer. As Elizabeth Petroff elegantly states it,

Visions led women to the acquisition of power in the world while affirming their knowledge of themselves as women. Visions were a socially sanctioned activity that freed a woman from conventional female roles by identifying her as a genuine religious figure. They brought her to the attention of others, giving her a public language she could use to teach and learn. Her visions gave her the strength to grow internally and to change the world.²⁷⁶

Dreams gave voices to women who otherwise might have been silenced. Perpetua was but one of many women dreamers whose importance, strength, and power in the waking world depended on the impetus of their dreams and visions. We will see in the following chapter that the same may be said of those members of a board of trustees who are dreamers and visionaries, not in the oneiric understanding of the words, but in the sense that they look to the future and are willing to embrace change.

²⁷⁵ Harold Evans, “White House Book Club,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 15 January 2001, p.31.

²⁷⁶ Petroff, 6.

CHAPTER FIVE

LESSONS FOR MINISTRY

This chapter will venture to show that one can draw an analogy between Perpetua and the interpreters of her dreams and the behavior of members of boards of trustees. We will consider how questions of power, pluralism, vision and criteria of appropriateness apply to each of these admittedly very different camps.

Through an examination of the manifold interpretations of Perpetua's life and dreams, we have seen that each interpreter claims a certain authority to construe the text of the *Passio*. Whether it be a Doctor of the Church such as Augustine, a scholar on the order of Patricia Cox Miller or a poet like Sarah Flower Adams, the interpreter assumes the power to instruct the reader as to how the story should be read and what it really means. The reader may not agree completely, or at all, with what the interpreter says; but the interpreter, at least for a time, controls the argument, provides its boundaries and sets its tone. The interpreter is the text's mediator, transposing it from past to present, seeking in Tracy's words, "to retrieve its somewhat strange, somewhat familiar meanings."²⁷⁷ A similar analysis can be applied to the role of a trustee. The issues of interpretation which Perpetua's story raises are also raised in the boardroom. There are, for example, questions of power, orthodoxy, control,

²⁷⁷ Tracy, 99.

privilege, and context that are common to both. Trustees wrestle with issues of power and subjectivity much as Perpetua's interpreters wrestle with the *Passio*. We have seen that interpreters approach a text with their own presuppositions; so, too, do trustees approach their institutional responsibilities with their own set of prior understandings and biases based on parameters as varied as age, gender, race, class, education, employment, wealth and political affiliation. These internal imperatives, as Tracy would call them, are not necessarily liabilities if they contribute to the creation of a pluralism which benefits the institution which the trustees serve.

My lay ministry consists of service as a trustee on the boards of seven not-for-profit institutions and as a paid advisor to the trustees of a \$15 billion public employees' retirement system and a \$20 billion investment pool administered by the State of Alaska for the benefit of the State's residents. My commitment to this ministry has its source in a conviction that trustees can be visionaries--agents for positive change both within their institutions and the community at large, while at the same time exercising responsible financial and organizational stewardship.

Any observant trustee must acknowledge that his or her position in an institution involves power, control and authority. In most cases, the board is the ultimate authority on issues involving an institution's self-definition, goals and objectives, future planning, finances, personnel policies and posture toward the community. A board member holds specifically defined powers which confer authority by virtue of an organization's by-laws, state and federal statutes and common law. Other powers may accrue because of tradition, community influence, financial power or social deference. These powers come with a

board seat; authority and privilege adhere to the position. They are part of its context. Just as one expects a scholar to be comfortable with the authority he or she wields over a text being explicated, a board member must be equally comfortable with the power the position entails. Not every board member may understand or be comfortable with this sort of power and authority. Some may be reluctant to exercise the power the position commands because of personal timidity, a desire to enjoy the prestige but not the responsibility of board membership, or over-reliance on long-standing board members or senior staff. Still others may reach for more power than they are legitimately entitled to hold. They might covet the day-to-day operational powers that should be reserved, for example, to a school's dean, a museum's curator, or a library's unionized director. It is important for a trustee to exercise the authority which the position confers while respecting authority which is domiciled elsewhere, just as it is important for the interpreter of a text to justify his or her conclusions and meet the relevant criteria of adequacy.

Similar challenges face the interpreters of Perpetua's dreams and the responsible trustee. In the preceding four chapters we have asked, implicitly and explicitly, a number of questions: How far afield should an interpreter wander from his or her specialty? How much should an interpreter rely on those who have gone before and how much deference should be shown to them? How insistent on the veracity or necessity of a single interpretation alone should a commentator on Perpetua be? Is the interpretation of an ancient text such as the *Passio* to be reserved only to those who have mastered the necessary languages and the historical context? Should those trained in other specialities (e.g., psychology, political economy, fiction) be given equal access

and an equal hearing? We have answered these questions by following David Tracy's argument that all interpreters of a classic text come to it with preunderstandings, but that those very preunderstandings lead to interpretations which provoke us and widen our horizons. All interpretations should, however, be subject to some sort of a test. Tracy proposes the idea of "criteria of appropriateness" or "criteria of adequacy" beyond which, one presumes, an interpretation would be unacceptable. But within the bounds of the criteria, pluralism of interpretation is not only encouraged, it is demanded.

Analogous questions may be posed to the trustee: Should a new trustee's opinion be as heavily weighted as that of an experienced senior trustee? How should a trustee exercise his or her power on a board? Should only those trustees expert in finance sit on the budget or investment committees, or should those from other fields (e.g., social service, academics, priesthood) participate as well? How much familiarity should a trustee have with disciplines distant from his or her own? Tracy's strategy can be successfully applied here as well.

Just as Perpetua's interpreters must respect criteria of appropriateness and must not abuse the power attached to their control of the text, so too must a trustee be wary of the misuse of power in relationships with other board members, staff and the public. There are cliques on boards which undermine fair and open discussion and consensus building by voting en bloc to advance their own agendas and stymie the ideas of others. The formation of such pressure groups is a misuse of power on the board level and is just as unfair as it would be for an interpreter of a text to prevent other views from being heard. Board members who occupy particularly powerful positions outside an

institution (for example, a high political office holder, a bank president, the scion of an old family, the head of a large local employer) may use their “outside” power, intentionally or perhaps unconsciously, to coerce other members to vote their way. While it is naive to think that an individual trustee should or could completely disregard his or her outside life when attending a meeting, a distinction must be made between power relationships inside and outside the boardroom. A trustee must not carry the “outside” authority he or she holds over another trustee into an “inside” board meeting to stymie different ideas.

Because of the inherent disequilibrium of power between trustee and staff, a trustee must not look to staff for close friendships or to have his or her emotional needs met. Showing an honest interest in a staff person’s work, ambitions and problems may be part of a board member’s responsibility and may make a positive contribution to the health of the organization, but the difference in power between the two parties must be recognized and improper closeness must be discouraged. Similarly, a trustee must never take advantage of the power disparity to favor one staff member over another (or try to influence an executive director to do so) for personal or political reasons. A trustee should not use a board position to gain special privileges which the public might not enjoy. For example, a trustee’s right to use an institution’s facilities or collections or staff time should rank equally with that of the general membership or public; a trustee should follow the same procedures as the public in applying for such use.

Appropriateness

In Chapter One we considered the textual problems of Perpetua’s dream

record and concluded that an interpreter must be aware of issues such as authorship and translation and treat them in good faith. In Chapter Three we addressed the application of Tracy's criteria of appropriateness to the work of Perpetua's interpreters. We questioned whether an interpreter was bound to disclose to the reader issues of what the legal world might call conflicts of interest, whether the scholar was writing as a Jungian analyst, say, or a Roman Catholic priest, or a committed feminist. We also raised the question of exactly what constitutes fiduciary responsibility for a scholar. In dealing with the implications of Tracy's theories of pluralism, subjectivity, preunderstanding and appropriateness, we draw near to the legal concept of fiduciary responsibility. The concept of fiduciary responsibility for a scholar is theoretical, as Tracy's work show us. Matters are clearer for the trustee since the Commonwealth of Massachusetts has spelled out the legal responsibilities of charitable board members, what Tracy would call their criteria of appropriateness. A former Attorney General writes that

If you are a member of the board of a charitable organization, you and your fellow board members are responsible for governing the charity as it carries out its charitable mission. The law imposes on you two primary duties. The duty of care means that you must act with such care as an ordinarily prudent person would employ in your position. The duty of loyalty means that you must act in good faith and in a manner that you reasonably believe is in the best interest of your charitable organization.²⁷⁸

How does a trustee ensure that he or she is exercising the proper care and loyalty to which the Attorney General refers? A trusteeship is not a reward simply to be enjoyed, nor is it a sinecure, nor is it a position to which one gives only spare time. Proper care begins with taking the job seriously. This means

²⁷⁸ Scott Harshbarger, *The Attorney General's Guide for Board Members of Charitable Organizations* (Boston: n.d.), 1.

being there. A trustee should attend as many board and committee meetings as possible; if one cannot regularly attend meetings one should resign. A trustee should frequently visit the institution, not to perform a surprise inspection but to see the organization in a working mode and to better understand its day-to-day operations. A trustee should not be expected to know every aspect of an institution in detail, but general operational familiarity is essential. Recurring visits will show both executive director and staff that a trustee is not just a figurehead but is actively concerned about the people, physical plant and programs of the institution. Of course, the diligent trustee, like the diligent dream interpreter, must guard against too much personal involvement; being interested does not mean being overly intrusive and attempting to do someone else's job. Visits should not be used as opportunities for ad hoc criticism or complaining. Problems that one notices on visits should be discussed in confidence at the proper time during board meetings. Trustee recognition of a smooth-running organization and praise of those responsible for it, however, should always be welcome.

Care also requires that a trustee have access to the data and written materials needed to make informed decisions just as a scholar seeking to explain the Perpetua text must have access to the studies of others. Asking staff to provide this information either before meetings (if the issues are complex) or at meetings but before a vote (if the issues are relatively simple) is a reasonable request. The dissemination of information should be inclusive and uniform. All board members should receive the same information at the same time. No individual member should be privileged over another.

An educated board is a productive board and the Attorney General

advises that trustees “must take the initiative to “make sure that board education programs are offered regularly.”²⁷⁹ Programs might be scheduled as retreats with either a staff specialist or an outside consultant exploring an upcoming issue or a new area of focus. Or a part of every second or third board meeting (assuming monthly meetings) might be devoted to an educational presentation. The institution’s attorneys, accountants and other professionals should be invited to speak to the board on a regular basis, not just when there is a problem or emergency. The preparation of a board manual should also come under the rubric of education. A manual will help obviate the “I didn’t know” excuse that may be used by old and new trustees alike.

In addition to care, fiduciary responsibility entails loyalty to the institution the trustee serves. This means always putting the needs of the institution first. One’s personal agenda must be subordinated to the best interests of the organization. Again the Attorney General provides useful guidelines which include:

1. Establishment of a policy for dealing with conflicts of interest.
2. Disclosure by all board members of any business involvement, direct or indirect, with the institution.
3. Withdrawal from discussion and voting by any board member involved in a business transaction with the institution.
4. Outside evaluation of any major business transaction being proposed between the institution and an entity in which a board member has a significant interest.²⁸⁰

The appearance of a conflict of interest may be almost as critical as an actual

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 9.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

conflict. This is as true in a board environment as it is in a scholarly setting. In order to maintain the respect and confidence of the public and other trustees, a trustee must not even *seem* to have a conflict. If a trustee is thought to be benefiting personally from a board position, the integrity of the entire institution may be called into question. In short,

Any conflict transaction should be scrutinized very closely by the board, both because of the dynamic it creates within the board and because of the predictable skepticism with which the public will view the transaction, no matter how scrupulously a careful policy is followed.²⁸¹

Such issues may arise not only in the fiduciary sense of conflicts, but also in the sense of a trustee's unwillingness to acknowledge his or her preunderstandings. When reading an interpretation of Perpetua's dreams one sees the same conflict of interest issues in play. This is not to say that a Freudian therapist should not explain Perpetua's life by psychoanalyzing the text or that a scholar or novelist with Arab nationalist sympathies should not find Perpetua to be party to a Berber resistance movement. The encounter between interpreter and text is not a conflict as long as the writer's vision is authentic, the preunderstanding admitted, and other interpreters permitted their own voices.

Leadership, Conviction and Anxiety

The issue of leadership comes in a variety of forms and also straddles both textual interpretation and trustee behavior. Trustees may be charismatic and inspirational and driven to imprint their own vision upon an organization. They can also be quiet consensus builders, working carefully and deliberately toward their goals. In practice, most trustees occupy one of the many

²⁸¹ Ibid., 7.

gradations in between these oversimplified extremes. We have observed that Perpetua's interpreters also fall on such a continuum. Some argue for their vision of the martyr with fervor and absolute conviction; others are more balanced and hesitant, ready to concede that other views may coexist with their own.

Perpetua's dream account illustrates how she became a leader by affirming her own convictions rather than adhering to the established norms of her society. The subtext is that one becomes a leader, a visionary, by becoming more fully oneself. In a discussion of leadership in the contemporary church, Ronald W. Richardson uses 1 Corinthians 12:4-31 as a touchstone to his observation that "leadership is a part of the community" and that "each member of the body becomes a leader by becoming more fully itself, differentiating into what it was created to be."²⁸² That is, leaders see the group they are leading as a system and see themselves as both a part of that system and yet unique within it. Richardson rephrases his observation to assert that "The message...is that you become a leader by becoming more fully yourself."²⁸³ Although his remarks are aimed at priests and congregations, they apply equally well to trustees and boards (and to interpreters of Perpetua's dreams). A trustee in a leadership position must above all know and value himself or herself. This requires, as Richardson notes, "having a 'self' focus rather than an 'other' focus" and "clarifying the beliefs, values, commitments, and life principles that make sense to us."²⁸⁴ Once a leader has this self focus, it is important that it be communicated. Caroline Westerhoff writes that "If we do not or cannot assert

²⁸² Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 172.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 177.

who we are and what we are about--or are not heard when we try--finally we will have nothing to offer any relationship."²⁸⁵

A good trustee will have or cultivate a non-anxious presence.

Richardson observes that if an organization's leader is himself or herself not anxious, the odds are that the atmosphere in the organization will be calmer and more conducive to rational and thoughtful decision making.²⁸⁶ On the contrary, "When a leader cannot contribute to this kind of atmosphere, the thinking processes in the group are short-circuited, and people become more anxious and more emotionally reactive and make poorer decisions."²⁸⁷ How does a leader develop and maintain a non-anxious presence? One answer to this question takes us back to the concept of self-differentiation. If one is comfortable with one's place in the greater scheme of things, as Perpetua was, assuredly one will be less anxious about the ups and downs of life. This does not mean that one should be self-centered and oblivious to the tensions which come with board responsibility, but that one should be able to handle those tensions without increasing the level of anxiety of the group.

A second response to the question is that lower anxiety may come from greater self care. A trustee must be concerned with his or her own well-being. One has all too often heard comments about trustees to the effect that "the Museum is her whole life" or "he works harder on the Library's finances than he does on his own." These remarks were probably meant as compliments, but are they? A trustee who neglects his or her private life and the needs of his or her family or business may be headed toward a greater rather than a lesser

²⁸⁵ Caroline Westerhoff, *Good Fences* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), 62.

²⁸⁶ Richardson, 173.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

level of anxiety and may eventually damage the institution which commands such devotion. Perspective is required to place the institution's demands in the proper place alongside of one's own personal needs. One board leader can benefit by sharing problems with the leader of another board just as one scholar might share a difficult point of interpretation with another. Honesty in the admission of a troubling situation can be the first step towards its resolution. Five years ago, the Boston Athenaeum instituted an annual reception for chief executives and board chairs of local cultural institutions in the hope that it might eventually lead to a freer exchange of ideas and between them. This has indeed occurred. Similar events might be planned around common problems of trustees.

Pluralism and Leadership

Boards of Trustees today look quite different from boards of the 1950's. This is true because boards, out of self-interest, have seen the benefits of diversity among their members and have invited minorities to join them. It is also true because visionary minorities themselves have claimed authority in the institutions with which they are involved, much as the women visionaries discussed in Chapter Four claimed authority through the medium of their dreams. Membership on the board of a major charitable or cultural institution is no longer viewed as an elitist prerogative. Nor is it limited to straight, white, Protestant, upper-class males. True, there are institutions which do expect trustees to make significant financial contributions to endowment and capital fund drives, and one can still buy a seat on certain boards with a major gift. But for the most part, today's boards are striving to be more representative of the

society around them and the communities they serve. To meet the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world, boards must look for competency and not pedigree, for those who enjoy change rather than for those who automatically favor the status quo. The Attorney General has counseled Massachusetts organizations to “make sure that [a] board’s process of selecting new members assures diversity of viewpoints and rotation of board members and officers.”²⁸⁸ Gilbert Rendle, quoting Ronald Heifetz and Daniel Laurie, explains that “Different people within the same organization bring different experiences, assumptions, values, beliefs and habits to their work. This diversity is valuable because innovation and learning are the products of differences.”²⁸⁹

Without diversity an institution will find it difficult to reach and to serve a wide constituency in all its fullness; without diversity there is little chance for new vision and the threat of stagnation increases. There is a case to be made for the equivalent of an affirmative action program for trustee selection in order to ensure that diversity is achieved. Similarly, we have seen that pluralism in textual interpretation is important. The many voices we have heard explaining the meaning of Perpetua’s dreams enhance our appreciation of them, stimulate our desire to learn more about them and inspire us to apply the lessons we learn from the text to contemporary situations.

Charitable boards tend to be comprised of relatively independent people, just as those who have addressed themselves to Perpetua’s dreams are independent in thought. Trustees don’t have to do what they are doing, they are not usually paid, they cannot be compelled to stay if they want to leave, nor can

²⁸⁸ Harshbarger, 3.

²⁸⁹ Gilbert R. Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations* (n.p.: Alban Institute, 1999), xi.

they be forced out save for major transgressions or the natural end of a term. Most trustees consider their board memberships as a form of community service; they answer to no higher authority within their institution. Managing trustees, it has been said, is like herding cats. They are going to follow their own instincts. This is also true, at least in part, of those interpreters who have wrestled with Perpetua and her dreams. Perhaps the best way to reach a board is to show that what one is proposing is congruent with their better instincts. New ideas should be presented as common sense proposals rather than dictates. Most of the board members I know enjoy owning a proposal rather than acquiescing to a fully designed blueprint set before them. Nurturing will have a better effect than force feeding. One should also remember that most trustees are successful people with a desire for further successes. If they see a new idea as promoting success, they are likely to favor it. Topics such as diversity and fiduciary relationships should be presented as aids to success rather than as protections against failure or adverse legal action.

Conclusion

The first four chapters of this thesis have focused on Perpetua and her dreams. This final chapter has sought to draw analogies between issues faced by interpreters of texts such as the *Passio* and those faced by trustees. We have seen that in both cases, individual biases and preunderstandings exist; perhaps no interpretation and no trustee voice can (or should) be free of such preunderstandings; and one may find in them strengths rather than liabilities, as long as certain reasonable standards of appropriateness are met. A plurality of opinion is of benefit to both a scholarly community and an institutional board.

We have also noted the importance of vision in its many forms. We have seen how Perpetua and other women used their oneiric visions for empowerment and to advance the very real visions they had for their work in the waking world. Similarly we have observed the several ways trustees might successfully promote the visions they have for their institutions.

For a final observation on the interpreters of the *Passio* as well as on trustee behavior, we may do well to turn to Isaiah Berlin, who proposed that thinkers be categorized as either hedgehogs or foxes.²⁹⁰ The foxes “pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some *de facto* way” while the hedgehogs “relate everything to a single central vision.”²⁹¹ In interpretation and in the boardroom, there is a place for both.

²⁹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox : An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

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